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# The Artificial Insemination Crew and other stories

by

William Clarence Fledderus

A work of fiction submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Department of English

Edmonton, Alberta

Fall 1995

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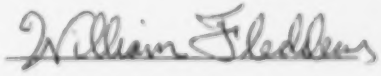

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To Susan
who made this writing, and much else, possible.
Hebrews 10:23-25.

*Abstract*

These seven stories explore vocational, ethnic, sexual, religious, and gender tensions between individuals and the subcultures in which they find themselves. The depicted workplace, church, and family environments are based on existing communities and institutions founded and supported by Dutch Calvinists and their descendants in Alberta, southern Ontario, and Michigan. The use of a generally traditional, realist mode of writing has ties to other fiction produced in and about these social circles.

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# Hands of Myrrh, Hands of Vinegar

*I arose to open for my lover, and my hands dripped with myrrh,*
*my fingers with flowing myrrh, on the handles of the lock.*
*I opened for my lover, but he was not there.*

—Song of Songs

I have this dream I am washing the kitchen windows with vinegar water and my mother comes up behind me to check on me. I am wearing an old pair of shorts and a striped T-shirt that's gotten just a little too tight over my chest to wear in public. She puts her hand on my shoulder and sings words into me, "Come see-ee us in the fa-mi-ly room, after your brothers-and-sisters are in bed. We'll talk." I can tell it's her and I get it even without really seeing or hearing. She sings like an opera singer, and the music prickles into my shoulder like when part of you falls asleep from lack of blood. I am conscious that I am dreaming and that in real life my mother only sings songs and hymns. And what she's saying—she has *never* invited me alone after bedtime like this. What could I have done? Fear balloons inside me, and when I finally show up at ten o'clock in my long nightgown and the required bathrobe, my cheeks are hot. They are waiting for me: plaid couch, coffee table, our massive TV with its imitation wood, bookshelves with *Funk & Wagnalls* and *Acts of Synod*, hanging spider plants and violets by the window, a reproduction of *Man with the Golden Helmet*. My dad reading the *Free Press*, my mom knitting beside him.

Dad lowers the paper with a rustle, but doesn't fold it away, and says: "Your mother thinks it's time we talked to you about 'intercourse.' Do you know what that is?" His voice comes from somewhere in his beard. He's always had a typically Reformed beard (without a moustache), but now his lips have disappeared under the hair. I glance at Mom, who is serious and expectant, and then at the floor. Oh, Dad, you really don't want to do this! My

blood pounds in my ears. I feel myself turning beet red now—my stupid face! I want to make excuses, but my tongue is as slow to move as a sack of dirt. Aaagh! I lurch awake, pinned down under the weight of all my wool blankets. The house is silent.

That's a dream that'll definitely *never* come true. Picture one of our typical recent dinner scenes instead:

Dad frowns and scratches in his beard, his dinner plate stacked on Mom's, the Bible in its place. We've just begun another of our annual read-throughs of the Bible, and he's just finished reading aloud part of Genesis. He's taking a few seconds, maybe to re-read a few lines for himself—long enough to show respect but not to leave any opening for questions.

It's a dangerous moment, because he's just finished one of the awkward parts about circumcision or about Dinah or Tamar (it's proof of our orthodoxy not to skip these parts). My mind is swarming with questions (cheeks warm again with what Aunt Trudy calls "that healthy glow"), but I seek them out one by one and cut them down. My youngest brothers and sisters are sitting straight and staring at the dish of mashed potatoes by my father (the rule is they're not supposed to look around during Bible). Jen and Tom, who are older, have glazed, cloudy eyes. I am the only teenager so far in our family.

Mom sits demurely with wisps of hair escaped from her bobby pins hanging down. It's the colour of dry sand (her hair, I mean), tied back from a squarish face with oversized oval glasses. Her body, in a cotton dress, is shaped like a box, squared at her shoulders and hips, but her chest is like a single rounded pillow, as if it were a man's chest with a bolster across it. She's shorter than dad, and even than Tom and me, but her eyes miss nothing, even my looking around—which she'll probably ask me about later. She is our peacekeeper and peacemaker, the "wife of noble character" described in Proverbs 30. She talks a lot, and she's

always really busy. Bible time is one of the few times she sits still.

Dad closes the book, pushes it aside to make room to rest his wrists, folds his hands. "Let's pray." Then, "Kathleen and Josh, fold your hands, please, and close your eyes." He begins to lead us in prayer—slowly at first, taking comfort in the pauses, then more assuredly as the usual phrases begin to come. He supplicates for our cousins in the Netherlands who, Mom heard on the CBC while she was cooking, are facing extremely high winds and possible flooding after a week of bad weather. I have never met these cousins. Dad has not seen them since he went back for Oma's funeral. He even intercedes on behalf of the minister, the elders and deacons, the prime minister, and the agriculture minister.

Having restored safety and comfort, he goes on to pray for God to forgive our sins, and I feel my cheeks flushing even hotter. I hope nobody will notice. It's this problem I have, I'm doing something really, really sinful on purpose. Maybe I'm fooling myself, but if Jacob and Tamar could do all the awful, sinful things they did. . . . I've been reading all these historical romances every time I go to the mall, crouched in an aisle in the library— you know, the ones with the long-haired woman on the cover falling into the arms of some gorgeous guy, though in the book he's usually mean and rude to her first and she thinks she hates him. It's totally awful, but I actually read them for the sex scenes. I sit there, as still as I can so not to draw attention, and flip through one after another until my legs burn from lack of circulation, and then I borrow the ones with the most sex, though it's awful having to check out books with sexy covers under the eyes of the frizzy-haired librarian. It's even worse now, because I've started on books about Hollywood, like by Harold Robbins or Jackie Collins—covers with parts of women's bodies on them and weird sex with cocaine and swimming pools and videotape cameras. I take them to a table for two in the food court and re-read the sex scenes from one book after another in a flurry, making myself all excited and

disgusted at the same time. I have to keep checking to make sure there's no one around that knows me, because once I saw a couple of guys from school, and now I'm paranoid. If it's a Saturday I go to the bathroom instead.

I am afraid of what I could be doing to myself, to my mind and not to mention my soul. But just no way am I going to remain the class stooge when it comes to boys and sex! Really. The first time in gym, the girls all laughed at me when they saw I still wore pads with belts—and the worst is that it was more embarrassed laughing than teasing laughing. I swear my mother had never told me everyone used the other kind. She didn't tell me anything—I didn't even know how you get pregnant! So that day I vowed to do *anything* rather than go any further so stupidly ignorant. No way am I going to stumble into sex the way I stumbled through my first bloody period! God, I pray I'm not filling my mind with damning thoughts, but when it comes down to it, even if I am I don't care.

Part of all this has to do with Chris Spirou. Chris is my first real boyfriend. We've been going out for three months and we have real potential. We do so many great things together, like going for walks or playing basketball or making fun of TV shows . . . and like French kissing. I know, I wouldn't have believed it myself a month ago that I would ever . . . be this way with someone, but it happened so naturally, and it feels so right! He can be real gentle and concerned about my feelings, though when you first see him with his big nose, his jaw like a football, and his toothy smile, you may not have that impression. He also has bulgy blue eyes, pimply skin, dark hair parted down the middle, and wears Birkenstock sandals all the time. Not exactly the hero of *Defiant Ecstasy*, but he's real, and he cares about me—he's said so. It's growing into love, and I'm terrified I'll botch it by freaking out on him when he does any more physical stuff.

Chris works part-time for a rose nursery, which should be a point in his favour with

my folks. Sometimes he gives me a massage—I carry stress in my neck and shoulders (do all women carry stress here? is it because of the weight of our breasts?). While he massages me I get him to talk about places he has been—Greece and Italy!—and he tells me these long involved stories. I relax and daydream. We often end up lieing down together and kissing each other—but we don't take off any clothes. His chin can be scratchy, but his mouth is so soft—sometimes I even . . . get wet down inside.

One time he even touched my right breast—well, "caressed" I guess is more like it. We were just fooling around in his parents' basement watching hockey and rough-housing. We stopped to rest, and I sat leaning against him on the floor. There was nothing really to say, and then he reaches around with his left hand and cups my breast. Gently, and he just holds it in his big warm hand. I didn't do a thing, I was surprised—embarrassed really (I'm not very big up top). It was dead quiet except for Don Cherry ranting on and on, and Chris caressed me a little and then rested his hand up on my shoulder. I still didn't move but I could still feel it where he had touched. It was warm and I shivered. He kissed me below my ear slowly several times, and then moved his hand back again. It was more strange than exciting, although he sighed as if it was really beautiful. (Afterwards I decided it was nice in a gentler way than I had expected.) He stopped pretty soon—I got alarmed when I started to have feelings down below, too. I asked him not to do it again in the near future, and then I gave him a hug. I can't believe I said that, "in the near future." Duh! I'm even less articulate with him than I am usually. He must have understood, because we're still going out.

To Mom and Dad Chris is still only "this friend of mine". I am afraid to invite him over for dinner, because Mom will insist on treating him as if he were a visiting political dignitary. He will be given *speculaas* and tea in the guest chair in the living room. In Mom's school of manners, protests really mean their opposite, and she will keep serving more. When

everything is ready he and the guest chair will be moved to the kitchen. Dad will ask what Chris thinks of the state of preaching in the church, and I just know he will say something terribly wrong like: "Which church?" Or else he'll try to hold my hand under the table, like he did once at his house. I would just die!

This is what happened to me last night:

I go back to the mall to read *Sweet Savage Love* in a stall in the ladies' room. It's a small ladies' room, not the main one, and it's not used it much. The heat is always on too high. I have vowed not to, but I touch and caress myself again in the place that is not supposed to be awake until marriage. When it is over I wash my hands, but when I hold my fingers to my face I think I can still smell it—that awful smell accuses me. Is this what Chris wants with me? My body is supposed to be a temple of the Holy Spirit. Even if I look at a man lustfully, I am supposed to have already committed adultery with him in my heart.

Coasting past the Catholic church two blocks from my house, I see some lights on. I turn in quickly and park my bike in the shrubs along the side. My feet sink slightly in the soil. The shrubs smell sharp and the earth smells clean, like after a rain. I try one of the huge carved front doors, and I can pull it open. Inside, the place is only half-lit, a bright light coming from the end on the side. I walk toward it, and statues of men and women and Bible scenes jut out from the pillars and walls. Down a hallway in an administrative room I find a priest at a desk.

"Hello," he says, startled. He is clean-shaven, wears these black-rimmed glasses.

What do I say? "I want to become a nun," I say, surprising myself.

He raises his brow, a single line in which his eyebrows have grown together. "Please, have a seat." I sit on a metal folding-chair. "Have you ever visited a convent?"

I shake my head. Thankfully it's cool, or I'd be red already.

He puts down his pen slowly. He talks slowly, too, deliberately. "Have you talked to anyone about this before? What parish are you from?"

"Um, well, actually, I'm not exactly Catholic. Uh. . . ."

"Oh." He leans back, his wooden chair creaks.

"You see," I'm trying to think fast, "what I really need is to talk to someone. I need to confess something."

"Well. . . ." He looks at me seriously. "Do you know that through Christ we can bring all things before God?"

"Yes, but . . . when I pray, God doesn't talk back. I mean, not very much. I need someone to talk back to me right away. It's really important. You can talk for God, can't you?" I am talking too fast.

He is quiet for I don't know how long. There are lots of books behind him, sets of matching hardcovers. He has shelves covering that whole wall, and the one beside. He says, "Why don't you tell me what's on your mind, and we'll bring it to God together."

"Don't we need to go to one of the booths?"

"No."

"Oh." So I focus on the wood grain on the near edge of his desk and tell him about how Chris and I French kiss, and about how I can feel his thing move against me and, with our recent family reading of Leviticus in mind, about the discharge I found on my pants, and about how I know that lust is evil, and how I tried to stop, and how God sometimes seemed to forgive me in church and sometimes not, and how I am afraid he will give up on me soon.

He says nothing, so I glance up. His brow is furrowed and his hands folded. He seems unwilling to consider any sudden movement. Eventually he reaches across the papers

on his desk and takes my hand in his and bows his head. The back of his hand is amazingly veiny. He prays for me, and when he draws back his hand, rustling the papers, I feel white as they are, mostly white except for the letters printed across them.

In the library I found a book that explains how to make a douche and I tried it the last time my parents were out. I am thinking that if they are still out when I get there I might try to make another one. Maybe it'll work better this time.

The arrow treads of the tractor tires turn silently at his sides. The *throb throb throb* of the engine is a harsh, simple pleasure, shutting out everything but the metal rattle of the hitch and the hitch chains, and the wood rattle of the wagon. On his face the wind is warm and humid, tainted with the acrid smell he should be used to after four weeks, a smell like that of sandwich meat gone bad: the urine, sweat, and dung of turkeys. A Canadian smell, or at least a rural one, it seems to him. In back of the barns the dirt track leads between the turkey range and a wall of tall, yellowing corn into the woodlot. He throttles up a little, increasing the squeaks of the seat and the tempo of the clanks and rumbles until it sounds like the wagon will fall apart. Behind him frozen corpses are jolting up and down on it. He takes off his CASE cap and runs a hand through his hair, feels the air tingle on his scalp. From his high perch he can see over the corn to his left to two neighbouring farms—oases of silos, gap-toothed wood barns, and rambling, porched houses surrounded by fields. The range on his right is uneven trammelled grass strewn with feathers and turkey dung, and thronging with thousands of hens. In various patches the grass has given way to bare, sandy earth.

A group of turkeys along the fence ignore the roar of the blue tractor until it is out of the sky and almost upon them, then scramble over each other to get away. One of the birds, just ahead, now alongside, does not flee. M'ammed abruptly clutches and brakes, causing a *bang* of protest from the wagon. The bird is still, its carbuncular neck caught in the fence. Both the neck and the head are lacerated, the feathers speckled red. The wings suddenly flap twice, then stop. Off the tractor, he can see the beak opening and closing and hear the cries—each one followed by the whelming echo of the other turkeys, which have already forgotten their fear and are approaching the injured bird. The caught bird flails its wings

again and claws crookedly in the packed dirt with its toes, unable to gain a purchase under the body.

"Birds are shit-on-legs once their necks'r screwed," his foreman, Doug, has told him, and gone on with his cotton-gloved hands to twist and snap the neck as if it were slightly-green wood.

Perhaps on the way back the bird in the fence will be ready to be picked up and thrown into the freezer, M'ammed hopes. He turns and climbs onto the tractor, but does not put it into gear. He rummages in the box behind the seat, finds a pipe wrench. By the fence he winds up and tries to bash the head, blinking at the last second, but the wrench is too short and the head has moved. He looks around, then quickly re-aligns himself with his shoulder to the fence, and with both hands brings down the wrench on the back of the neck, a blunt guillotine. There is a quick *plink plink* of breaking fence wires, and the wings flap violently, sending dust and small feathers into the air. The neck is incompletely severed. He climbs the fence near the post and, one arm shielding his face, looks for a way to seize the legs without getting scratched. He grabs high, away from the foot, and, surprised at the feel of it struggling against him, pulls back hard, jerking the head free from the enlarged hole. With his left he traps the free leg against the other—both gnarled and hard like dry vines or branches in his hand. He climbs the fence again holding the heavy body away from himself, spattering blood in the dirt and on his boot, and heaves the bird on the back of the wagon. The other corpses have slid towards the front, but not too far. The new bird lies with its neck pivoted unnaturally.

Back on the tractor, he drives for the trees. They meet over his head and then enclose him in cool shadow. A coil of rusted fence wire and the aluminum shell of a turkey feeder appear ahead to the left, then a kitchen range and what looks like a doorless olive fridge or

freezer. To the right, an abandoned olive-green station wagon with imitation wood panelling and removed windshields, and some overgrown machinery. A clearing opens up, the road forking to avoid a sudden drop in the land. He clutches and brakes, and leaves the tractor idling to look about. Over the smell of the engine, the air is rank with decay and chemicals.

The ridge slopes steeply down about seven metres and is strewn with various sorts of fill: an old couch, concrete and asphalt pieces, a frame of something made from two-by-fours. Several irregular heaps are obscured under a swarm of iridescent green-black flies. He moves the tractor nearer, but when he tries to throw down the carcasses two at a time they don't go far enough—they catch halfway down. Alright then, one at a time, with both hands. Each landing kicks up a cloud that swarms and resettles. The frozen legs are rough on his hands. At the end he stands looking at the two birds that have fallen short, then climbs down and heaves them one at a time onto the others. The embankment is dry and sandy, and he scrambles back up with difficulty.

Driving back, he passes the broken fence wires without slowing, though he knows the hole will have to be fixed. Thirty metres farther he stops and climbs the fence to check the automated feeders and drinkers in the middle of the field. Without the tractor, the squawking birds do not see him coming until he is stepping over them—he can see bird after bird replaying the identical moment of recognition, warning gobbles suddenly confirmed by sight, the frantic clambering on top of each other to get away. Over his shoulder he can see them, not three steps behind him, returned to their normal, jerky, milling about. He makes an imitation of a turkey call, *GUBBA gubba gubba gubba*, and there is a fraction of a second of silence after the heads pivot, and then the chorus responds, hundreds of throats crescendoing in high-pitched clamour.

Doug Selles, the crew leader, is already trusting M'ammed with unsupervised jobs, has even switched him with Mitch so that he could go up to learn to milk semen with Dillon. It has not even been a full month.

Friday during lunch Doug invites him outside, and then has to search for his cigarettes among boxes of syringes and semen straws above the coat rack in the hallway.

"Sorry, must've fallen behind."

The hall is built from unpainted particle board. Fly-by-Night's high-pitched voice can be heard from the egg room around the corner: "—the old woman—fuck, man, she went and bought a deep-fryer. All I got to eat is peanut butter and french fries!" *Har har har!*

Doug has found his pack, and the two of them step outside, the door banging behind them from its closing spring and cutting the others' laughter into short bursts. Sunlight glares from the windshield of Reeb's LTD. M'ammed is sure that they will be playing euchre in the same positions when he and Doug come back.

The gravel drive scrunches under their feet. Ten metres to the next barn, then it changes into patchy brown lawn until the wall of corn.

"You met Fly-by-Night's 'old woman'?" Doug asks, his voice ending in a moist croak which calls for several throaty hacks. M'ammed must wait, each cough making the dust in his own throat feel more threatening. M'ammed slaps some of the dust from his coverall, then realizes he has probably done just the wrong thing. "Oh, sorry."

Doug dismisses it with a wave. "'Scuse me." His voice is almost back, and better with each word. "Her name's Carla. Nineteen, but no dummy. They have a baby, two months old, named Brian. It's what she wanted."

They pass the rusty hopper and head for a picnic table in front of the tractor shed, breathing outdoor air and listening to the deep *thrum-thrum-thrum* of it being churned by the

giant barn fans. The tractor shed is made of peeling, blue-painted wood, and has three garage bays.

"You'll meet Carla at the employee banquet next Friday. You are coming, aren't you? Bring an escort, if you want. A girlfriend, M'ammed. Do you know someone you could ask?" Doug is turning over the red DuMaurier pack in his hands.

They sit at the table facing the direction they came: gravel and a wall of corn. Would Candace agree to come?

"Perhaps."

The previous weekend, M'ammed and Candace went out to A. J.'s, a Talbot Street "Rest-o-Bar" with imitation wood panelling, tiffany lamps, pots of ivy, and oversized tables and chairs. Two big speakers over the dance floor played loud country-rock, but at least at the table one could hear and be heard. A bunch of Candace's former highschool classmates had arranged with her to join them after dinner, and they arrived just as the waitress left to get change.

"M'ammed, this is Ria, Laurie, Jake, Kathleen, Ben. M'ammed is new at Greensway. The insemination crew, Doug Selles'. His brother goes to college with me in Harrisford." Five faces: Ria with a pinched nose and wavy hair he thought pretty, Laurie with short hair that overexposed her thick neck and arms and shoulders, Jake and Ben both moustached (Jake's rather thin), and Kathleen with red cheeks and bright eyes.

M'ammed had been wondering if "rosy-cheeked" was a good word for Kathleen, but Ben interrupted his thoughts by asking outright, "Where are you from, M'ammed?"

"Basra. In Iraq." What would these words mean to Ben?

"Oh. You want to become a Canadian?"

"Yes, my application is currently being processed. My brother Edward is here on a student visa."

"Good. I don't like foreigners who come here to earn money and send it all out of the country, you know?"

M'ammed felt weak in the face of such an opinion. The feeling stayed with him most of the evening, reinforced by these friends' familiarity with each other—and by his discomfort with the attraction he felt for Candace. Not wanting to stare, he allowed his eyes to return, as a sort of compromise, only to the gold earrings and necklace she was wearing. She wore an unbuttoned denim shirt over a ribbed undershirt. The herringbone-patterned necklace lay flat against the skin between her collar bone and her neckline, skin which, instead of being smooth, ran in faint horizontal lines—was it muscle, or was the skin naturally anchored there? Her face—in fact her arms, too—were narrow and expressive. He thought of the classical Persian poetry he had had to learn in school: "When she turns she shames the deer, and when she sways she shames the willow bough." Indeed, there were such women even in a small town.

"Hey, M'ammed," Ken suddenly addressed him, "after fucking turkeys you gonna move on to bigger animals?"

"Go fuck yourself, Ken," Candace said cheerfully. M'ammed tensed, but Ken merely shrugged. Ken was looking at Candace and not at him, and responded only by swirling his beer in slow circles. M'ammed felt Candace's hand on his forearm, but then the waitress arrived with another pitcher and M'ammed's ice water.

"I am a student of English novels and magazines, Ken," said M'ammed. "I would like to study to be a mechanical engineer." As soon as the words were out, the overture seemed foolish and wasted.

At ten o'clock an older man with a shock of white hair joined them, M'ammed wasn't sure from where, and followed Jake and Ben from their table to the dance floor. The man bobbed and bent at half the speed of the music, his feet anchored to the floor. He laughed with Ria and Kathleen, and joined them in their exaggerated mimicking of each other. M'ammed, who had done little of this sort of dancing, swayed in a subdued imitation of those around him. He felt he was merely running on the spot.

Back at the table, there was another full pitcher. Ben got the waitress to bring a clean glass and told the older man to help himself. M'ammed was trying to listen to Candace tell a story about something that happened on a canoe trip last summer.

"Ria, who was it that was in the tent when Jeff went in?"

"Wasn't it Kendra? I think it was Kendra."

"No, it wasn't Kendra. *I know*."

At the other end of the table Ben was talking with the stranger, the man's voice carrying as though he were addressing all of them: "—not the damn Americans' fault, can't blame them for looking out for their own interests . . . but the Tories, on the other hand, they can't seem to see any further than Bay Street. And who gets screwed as a result?"

Ben took his cue. "The little guy."

M'ammed left for the bathroom, his chair scraping with unfortunate loudness. He wished the man would shut up and leave. His feelings surprised him, for usually he enjoyed political discussion. Only a couple of days before he had participated in an interesting discussion with some students about cutbacks in government education budgets. Against the urinals, he heard the door and suddenly the man was beside him smelling of beer.

"You don't like me, do you?" his belt buckle jingling, he spit into the urinal.

"I wouldn't say that, sir."

"You don't know who I am, do you? I'm Candace's father."

"How do you do?" M'ammed stared at the wall tiles. "What do you do?"

M'ammed could see the smile without turning his head. "Mechanic by trade." The man paused, shifted. "Retired early. Left the garage to keep my boy Mike from moving away." He sighed and let loose a *sssshh* of urine. M'ammed was unable to do anything. The man continued. "It wasn't pushy, mind you. We had a good, businesslike talk, weighed the options. I was honest with him how I had hopes of him keeping the business going."

"Oh."

The man left A. J.'s soon after, and Candace's friends followed. M'ammed and Candace walked to Frosty's, which stayed open on weekends until early morning, and M'ammed bought Candace an ice cream, a Nutty Buddy.

"I had no idea that man was your father."

"You're kidding. Oh, M'ammed, I'm so sorry." Her forehead and eyes crinkled. "I never introduced you?" She hit herself in the forehead with an open palm. "I guess I thought you'd met before. . . . I've done that before, actually. Subconsciously I must think that when I know two people, they must know each other." She put her hand on his arm again. Was she this physically affectionate with everyone? "Were you uncomfortable?"

"I was . . . uncertain. Your father actually reminds me of an uncle of mine."

She looked at him, waiting for him to go on, forgetting her ice cream. He could see it brimming at the rim of the cone.

"He was a journalist. He joined the army."

"And . . . ?"

M'ammed shook his head. "He's supposedly in paradise right now." He sounded cool to himself. He had tried to sound that way.

Candace looked pained.

"Forget it. Some other time. Here, you'd better lick that ice cream," he said.

The silence between M'ammed and Doug in the garage having gone long enough to consider the conversation over, Doug walks over to the tractor and begins pulling clods of grass from the PTO and the mower. M'ammed joins him. They work together leisurely, methodically, and soon there is nothing left to be removed. Doug, looking over the machinery, steps back so that his legs are illumined by the dusty sunlight angling in the bay door. M'ammed sees a broom, and begins to sweep the clumps of grass and dirt from under the mower. Dust particles float up in the sunlit air. Doug nods, reaches into his breast pocket. M'ammed puts the dirt out the door, expecting to hear the flick of a lighter behind him. Yet when he returns the broom, Doug's hands are empty, still fidgeting.

"Better get back to work," Doug says.

In the barn they stop by for the others. The room has khaki walls, a blue sunken floor that slopes slightly to a drain, and smells of disinfectant. Reeb, Fly-by-Night, Mitch, and Dillon put away their game and pause to rearrange the hands of cards left by the absent egg pickers. The familiar sound of Tennessee lap steel is playing on the radio.

"C'mon guys."

"Aw, what's your rush, old man?"

In the aisle, where the fan noise raises the volume, Doug elbows Reeb. "I'll show you who's an old man—" They scuffle and spar, tiredly mimicking a fight while walking along, kicking up dust and feather tufts as they go past the stairs.

The joke almost abandoned, Reeb elbows Doug with surprising force, which leads to a headlock and then they're in the dust. Turkeys in the adjacent pens, separated from the aisle

by the rows of nests and wire, respond in blind panic, overwhelming the men's speech so that only the first half of any phrase is audible.

"Well, Gorilla, looks like a slam—" *GUBBA-gubba-gubba-gubba*!

"Sure is, Monsoon—" *GUBBA-gubba-gubba-gubba*!

"Give it to the—" *GUBBA-gubba-gubba-gubba*!

Beamer, a wiry, freckled fourteen-year-old egg picker, comes running down the aisle to watch.

"Fucking kick his—" *GUBBA-gubba-gubba-gubba*!

"Show some—" *GUBBA-gubba-gubba-gubba*!

There is a sickening thud: Reeb has hit his head on the nests, and the human commotion suddenly stops in surprise, the turkey clamour rising even higher and then fading to an interrogative clucking.

"You win," says Doug, "my old age tells me I have to quit."

Reeb is holding his head and gritting his teeth. He opens his eyes and points at Beamer, gets to his feet, charges him. "Back to work, you little asshole!" *GUBBA-gubba-gubba-gubba*!

"What?" M'ammed wonders. Beamer hesitates, scrunches up his face under his red *Molson* cap, then turns and walks away. The others give a hand to Reeb and Doug, and once again the crew heads up the aisle. M'ammed, standing next to Dillon, sees a tuft of down caught in the stubble of his sideburns. "Hold it a sec," he says, turning Dillon by the shoulder. He fakes a quick uppercut, but brakes his arm in time to pluck the down. Dillon hasn't flinched, and he grins stained-teeth self-congratulation, his face weathered and blotchy, red lines on the bridge of his nose and around his mouth from the dust mask. He shoves M'ammed back a step with both hands for good measure, and M'ammed shrugs it off.

At the middle of the aisle they turn aside into the insemination pit—just before catching up with Beamer, who is reaching into a top row of open nests, shooing a hissing bird off her eggs with a sawed-off hockey stick. "Bitch!" he says, and then there is the successful *clank . . . clankclank* of the metal nest-gate.

The men lower themselves into the pit as from the edge of a pool. Doug bends to check the machine: the status light on yellow, enough plastic semen-straws in the dispenser, two spare shrink-wrapped packages, one thousand each, beside. More semen and extender in the beer cooler. Alright. He pulls up his dust mask. It is M'ammed's job to drive turkeys into the holding pen. Fly-by-Night and Reeb will catch and lay them out on a plank for Doug to inseminate, after which they are sent off into the second large pen. M'ammed turns his back on them and wades through the birds.

At the annual banquet, Doug is invited to join Greensway owner Norman Parrish on the podium to accept a certificate for twenty-five years of service. Boisterous hoots and cheers from the crew shoot through the applause. The men and their families are grouped together at three tables. M'ammed is at Doug's table with Candace, Fly-by-Night and Carla and their baby, Brian. Doug's wife, Jamie, is there too: an aristocratic woman, M'ammed decides, of the kind he finds very attractive. Her greying brown hair up, she wears a dark green rayon dress cut to reveal the skin of her shoulders and neck, still luminous, though she is thin. Candace he thinks at least as fine in her black velvet prom dress with sleeves of translucent mesh. He twinges to think there was a time when all the women he knew wore the hijab, but then is angry with himself for it. As the applause for Doug dies down Candace lets M'ammed rest his hand on her shoulder. The material feels soft, unlike the plastic texture he had expected, and her shoulder warm under it.

"I remember the day he started," Parrish is saying into the microphone. He turns, his bald head gleaming, to smile at Doug. "Doug was a young married man with a child on the way. He needed work, I was setting up two insemination crews to rotate through my poultry farms. Doug had agricultural and experience on his father's farm, dairy mostly, but was a hard worker. He studied part-time to upgrade his knowledge of poultry biology, diseases, vaccination, became a crew leader, and the rest most of you know. Hats off to you, Doug."

Amid the applause Jamie leans across Doug's chair to M'ammed and hisses, "Hats off to popping turkeys for minimum wage and no benefits while Parrish built his little empire and kept out the union. . . . Oh, but I'm forgetting the free turkeys at Thanksgiving and Christmas."

M'ammed pulls back his hand, but Candace keeps clapping. Jamie's smile betrays no bitterness—either she is a good actress or she has repeated the same complaint until the emotion behind it has worn away. Doug himself seems nothing but proud up there. Parrish, bending at the back of the podium for Doug's gift, is both shorter and more lively than M'ammed imagined, a cross between Danny De Vito and a certain mayor of Basra. Doug, merely of average height, is at least a head taller. Parrish's tuxedo shimmers as he presents Doug with a huge wall clock made from the laminated cross-section of a tree.

The applause peters out as they return to their tables, Parrish's against the wall near the stage, where he and wife and family have a panoramic view of the hundreds of audience members, and Doug's near the middle of the hall. The MC's voice returns over the speakers, but at Doug's table no one listens. Jamie rises and gives him a hug and a kiss. Carla and Fly-by-Night get up, too, and M'ammed wonders if he should follow, but then he sees in her left hand the travel cover for plastic "sitter" in which Brian is strapped. The two of them shake Doug's hand as an apology for leaving early.

"Time to put him to bed," says Carla with a dimpled smile and large white teeth.

M'ammed comes over to look at the baby. "Does he look like Fly-by-Night, do you think?"

"Sure does," says Carla.

"He'll make a good egg picker, a good turkey catcher," jokes Fly-by-Night, "look at those hands." He gives Brian a finger to hold, and the baby wraps his fingers one at a time around it. Fly-by-Night offers two, and Brian painstakingly adjusts to hold both.

"All the smoke isn't good for him anyway," says Carla, who looks down for a moment and then shoos Fly-by-Night's hand away and snaps the cover into place. "We're heading home for a drink in the backyard, maybe watch the game, that's more my speed right now." M'ammed has not noticed any signs of tiredness.

Jamie nods. "We'll come by in a little while." As though she and Doug are buddies with this couple that could be their children.

Fly-by-Night turns to the rest of the table. "So come on by and put your feet up when you're finished dancing."

M'ammed and Candace look at each other. Candace, smiling, nods. "Sure."

"Where is it?" asks M'ammed.

"You can walk over," says Fly-by-Night, going on to explain. Doug tries to put the clock on the floor by his chair, but it is too big.

"Why don't you take it out to the car, honey?" Jamie suggests.

"A good idea," M'ammed says, turning from Fly-by-Night to Doug, and rising. "Let me go with you, to give you a hand."

"Alright."

"Excuse me," he nods to Candace and the others. Candace smiles generously, and it

touches him like a gift.

Across the creaky hardwood floor through the maze of tables and smells of salads and gravy and down the steps to the carpeted foyer, M'ammed is at a loss for words.

"Having a good time? Candace is quite a babe."

"Pardon me?"

Doug winks. "She seems nice."

"Yes. Yes, she is indeed. . . . Permit me to add my congratulations, by the way."

"Thanks." Doug stops near the door. "Mind holding this? I need a smoke."

"Sure." The clock is heavy and slick. M'ammed cannot imagine such a gift given in any other country in the world. "Do you like it?"

"The ol' bugger probably made it himself," says Doug, chuckling, flicking his lighter halfway to his face. M'ammed forces a laugh. Doug puffs, cigarette between two fingers. "Naw, I suppose it's nice. It'll look good in the family room. Nice dark wood. Kids'll like it." He opens the door.

Outside it is breezy and humid, dusk, and there is a smell of roast beef from the kitchen and of dust. Doug leads over the gravel to the corner of the lot, walking slowly, smoking—"Strolling," M'ammed thinks. The moon is already visible above a windbreak of trees in the field behind the lot.

"Jamie must be very proud of you."

Doug stops. "Yeah. Yeah, we've been together long enough to know when to keep out of each other's hair." He grins briefly, falls silent. Then he fumbles for his keys and opens the trunk. There are some woven plastic seed bags, and M'ammed helps him wrap the clock in them. "Well—here, let's put it up against the tool box, there," Doug says, lips stiff to hold the cigarette. It nestles snugly between the box and juts up over the edge of the spare.

Doug takes one last look and slams the trunk. He glances at M'ammed and taps his cigarette on the edge of the car. M'ammed is surprised at his own ghostly reflection in the rear window.

"I almost blew it with her once. . . . Jamie, I mean. Surprise you? She would have divorced me if it hadn't been for the kids, for Cam. Greensway was driving her crazy. The job, I mean, but living here too."

"You lived here?" Since M'ammed has known him, Doug has always commuted to area farms from his home in Harrisford.

"Yeah, that was oh, ten years ago. Fifteen. Over on Mackenzie Street, past the firehall. Wee-oo. Wee-oo."

"What . . . what happened?"

Doug blows out smoke in a steady stream. "It was a really bad time, a combination of things. Cam was in the hospital with pneumonia. Jamie and I had been avoiding each other for a while." He pauses. "Something happened, I still don't really know. There was this moment when she came through the door. In her old white sweater, something she'd worn when we first were going out—must have run out of clean clothes or something. It was like she was carrying all the things we'd done together. Sounds corny, eh? It all seemed suddenly too valuable to throw away. . . . Ever have that? You work at something for a long time because you have to, and somehow it becomes valuable, more valuable than the time you invested. Something like that hit me, maybe it was just nostalgia, and I said to myself, 'Fuck this, this is my Jamie.' I asked her down to the cafeteria for a muffin. I had a danish. We ended up agreeing to go to counselling . . . and, well, Jamie finally agreed not to harp on my job if I would agree to move to the city."

Doug is looking at the ground as he talks, but now he turns to reopen the trunk, the

tool box, takes out the first tray. Underneath is a metal thermos. "Calls for some Jack Daniels." He pours some into the lid, cigarette still between his knuckles, offers the lid to M'ammed.

"No thanks." He watches Doug gulp a bit. He puts his hands in his pockets and finds a roll of peppermints. "Well, perhaps I will join you."

Doug passes the lid. M'ammed drinks, the liquid burns down his throat. He looks at Doug and takes a second swig.

"We best be gettin' in, the ladies'll be wondering," says Doug in an artificial voice. He flicks away his cigarette butt, a spinning ember into the dark.

M'ammed wants to apologize somehow, but Doug has turned his back to him to put away the thermos, so he stops himself, and the first half-formed word comes out a grunt. Doug, in a hurry now, heads back to the lights, and M'ammed falls in. He takes out his mints and offers one to Doug.

Above their heads, off to the side as they head in, the kitchen fans hum steadily.

As the dance winds down, Candace raises her brow and inclines her head a few times toward the door. She has got M'ammed to try a Daiquiri, a Fuzzy Navel, an Orgasm. Each name seems more outrageous.

"Damn, you're a good dancer!" says M'ammed, bounding down the steps to the street. "There is hope for me yet, with someone like you." The whirl of colours and bodies is suddenly behind them, the street empty and cool, lit by humming yellow streetlamps. M'ammed is amazed at Candace's variousness. For the last few songs she somehow wrapped herself in quiet happiness in the middle of a blaring dance hall. Surely, he has never seen this in a woman. He attempts to hug and kiss her throat and keep walking, and stumbles.

"Whoops!" he says, tumbling onto someone's lawn, conscious of his exaggeration. On his back he can see the stars, the trees, Candace towering above. She looks down for a moment, a serious cast to her face, then helps him up. "What a night, what a night!" he says, only slightly subdued.

They make their way five blocks down Talbot into the town centre, and turn onto Grosvener. Something strikes him about the line between the street and people's front yards. "LOOK!"

"WHAT?"

"There are no curbs. The lawns just sort of . . . die away into the gravel. I wonder where the official edge of the street is."

"Twenty-nine". They have reached Fly-by-Night's house: narrow, one-storey, covered in siding, the number displayed in yellow cursive lettering on a space beside the front door. There are two pine trees in the middle of the yard and patio squares beside the house. They can hear the sounds of rock music and of a sports announcer coming from the back. Candace leads him down the unlit path to the back.

"Hey, M'ammed, how's it going? Hey, Candace."

There is a circle of people on lawnchairs: Dillon and Doug, Dillon's wife Wendy, Jamie, and a few unfamiliar faces. The light is harsh, coming from a single fixture above the back door, two bare bulbs in a clear glass case peppered with dead insects. Live ones circle madly, trying to get inside. The patio is just a few metres square, too small for the number of people, most of whom have their lawnchairs on the grass. The back of the house is no larger than the front. There is a television with a cord running through the kitchen window. A baseball game is on, the volume turned up to compete with a song by the Steve Miller Band.

M'ammed sits down under a tree on one of several empty chairs, abruptly

exhausted. . . . There is a sudden squall from the baby near the house and Carla, holding him, comes over to sit in one of the chairs under the tree. Time has passed from when he sat down. The boy flails wildly in her arm, crying and scrambling restlessly, but Carla has him firmly in one arm, while her hand works under her shirt. Something is wrong among the others. Reeb is on the path with a stranger in a purple lumber jacket, talking loudly, angry at something. M'ammed watches Reeb go over to Doug, push him, yell at him. The baby is still wailing. The intensity of the rough-housing is wrong. M'ammed wants to leave, wonders if this is really happening. There is a word to describe this wrongness. Doug and Reeb are trading blows, wrestling in the grass. The guy in the lumber jacket and the others are just standing around. What is it? What will happen? The radio and the TV continue their argument with each other. The baby quits wailing; he has found his mother's breast. M'ammed feels his throat tighten, the acid in his stomach moving up. He does not want to be here, to be a party to any of this. He looks down, at his hands, at the veins on the backs and the callouses in the pads of his palms. He wonders at the unfamiliar dryness and roughness of the skin.

## Pebble House

*"Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls."* —Luke 20:18

*"The technology of contemporary society is therefore mesmerizing not so much in its own right but because it seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand . . . [which can enable us to attempt] to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system."* —Frederic Jameson, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism

It had been a hectic Monday morning and Jennifer felt unsure, unsteady. Between heavy switchboard work, deliveries by mustached, hairy-legged UPS men with computerized clipboards, and student audio-visual keys signed out and in, she had only managed to stuff fifty envelopes for the fund-raising campaign.

She stood waiting for the cafeteria microwave—an oversized first-generation clunker which made her want to stand several metres back for safety—to finish nuking her leftover lasagna. "College Staff Become Mutants after Microwave Malfunction!" She could see it at the supermarket checkout already. Some days this job zapped her brain, she thought, imagining a cartoon image of steam escaping from her ears.

Two years ago she had been on the other side of the office counter in the world of ideas, wading through theories of personality, theories of development, Piaget, Maslow, Adler, Erikson, Fowler, Dabrowski (at least she could still rattle them off), chasing down articles from the Psych-Lit CD-ROM for her honours thesis, half of them in journals the college library did not subscribe to. She had pushed herself to exhaustion then, but even exhaustion had been tempered with satisfaction, somehow. Now her tiredness felt more like creeping laziness. Operating on autopilot as she had this morning should have been easy.

Yesterday had been much the same. After church she had put on her videotape of the figure skating championships—if anything could raise her spirits it would be watching Kurt

Browning do that Casablanca routine and Elvis Stoiko launch himself with those sexy legs—but it had not done anything for her. She had it memorized, it was more interesting to play it in her head, to imagine variations, tragic falls, triumphant comebacks. Later, making French toast, she had stared absently for at least a minute at the bread turning to slush in the yellow egg mix before realizing what she was doing. Her friend Jessie had been diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome in her third year of college, but, no, it couldn't be that.

Tonight she would keep it simple, make a salad and some pasta in front of the news, take a book and the radio with her into the bath. Wheeling in the TV would have been nice, but there was not enough room between the toilet and the door and she was not about to use the remote near water. "Boob Tube Junkie Scarred by Acid Bath—Just from Two AA Cells!" The book about Jacques Lacan that Professor Bylsma had lent her would stare down at her from the living room shelf, but it was not the kind of thing you could read in the bath. Besides, the Catherine Cookson novel she had out from the library would soon be due. Perhaps she could force herself to write Sonja a letter tonight. Or Mom! It must be over a month now.

*Ding*, the microwave summoned her. She opened the door and could see tomato sauce and drops of condensed steam hanging inside the translucent tupperware lid. Four minutes, it had to be pretty hot by now. She slid the container onto a cafeteria plate and carried it to the table where the rest of the secretaries were sitting. There was an open chair next to Janice and Tineke, two of the younger ones. On the other side of a vase with two carnations were Truus, Alice, and Anne laughing heartily, fifty-somethings with Dutch accents, the type who had more or less founded the college and continued to keep it afloat.

"—is that the one," Janice was asking Tineke, gesticulating with half a sandwich she had yet to begin, about a *Next Generation* episode involving Romulan peace delegations.

"No, no, in this one she actually empathizes so much with this alien life form that she becomes pregnant—" Both of them nodded in her direction, and in the pause Janice quickly took a bite of her sandwich.

Jennifer was going to say something about the neckline on Troi's uniform, but Truus, thank goodness, came to her rescue: she inhaled appreciatively and said, "I wish my Trish would take such good care of herself. She's always eating on the run."

A grateful smile. "How's her course at the university going?"

"She says it's good—but the way she rushes around. . . . Every time she gives me a ride somewhere in her car, she always has to brush breadcrumbs off the seat. One of these days she going to get sick. It's awful having to let your kids learn things on their own."

"She seems to be able to juggle a lot of things, like the play last year and all that."

"Well, as long as she doesn't get sick. I always encourage her to keep up her marks, but that staying healthy is more important."

Jennifer liked Truus, whom she knew from her parents' church as a forthright, opinionated woman who told you right away that she had Grade Eight Education plus Typing and Word Processing at night school (the capital letters were virtually audible). Truus' regular worried comments about her three teenage daughters were, Jennifer had concluded, really a kind of self-discipline to compensate for true feelings of pride. But today her worries seemed more a propitiary measure in case vengeful gods or demons were listening. She wasn't sure.

Janice and Tineke were now on about something private, in hushed tones. Jennifer ate her lunch quietly, enjoying it especially because she had made it herself, half listening to Anne's saying something about the children's opera company renting their church to perform *Noë's Flode*. Jennifer tried to imagine what her mother would be doing: volunteering at church or cleaning house, maybe out for a walk with King on the muddy spring trails, yes,

Mom with her fanny pack (New Testament, lip gloss, gorp), her Adidas running shoes, pants tucked into her socks as if she were going cross-country skiing, her walking stick to fight potential attackers. Whatever demons showed up, Mom would fend them off, no doubt.

Jennifer had bought her house last year on her father's advice as a way of investing her income. It was small, a one-storey stucco starter home with no front yard to speak of and some windows that would have to be replaced in the next few years. Dad had come down and examined the house for her and concluded they were the only major flaw. The pebbly exterior had seemed ugly at first, neither brick nor cement, but the inside was attractive. The previous owners, a young couple who had moved into something bigger in Amersdale so they could have children, had already taken out a wall between the living room and the kitchen, which combined with the high plastered ceilings to give the area a spacious feel that Jennifer had liked right away. They had also finished a room in the basement, which Jennifer rented to Melody, a university student. It was home now.

Jennifer was sprawled in her beanbag chair, having an instant cappuccino, listening to a Bach CD with recorders and harpsichord, and thinking. Melody often stayed out all night at friends' houses on the weekend, and Jennifer was trying to decide if such a life was better than the studious one she had led at the time. Melody was a theatre student and hung out with a crowd who smoked and sipped French brandy in wine glasses (one of them must have rich parents) and burned incense and quoted poetry—well, that wasn't quite fair, but Jennifer was miffed because she had found cigarette butts outside the back door for the third time in three weeks. Jennifer could see little difference between Melody's friends and the artsy-fartsies she had known at Sovereign College, and she had not been surprised by anything at the party Melody had invited her to the month before except that the music of choice seemed to have

become limited to raw guitar or else repetitive electronic samples. Jennifer imagined herself dancing to that—it would call for jerky, robotic movements.

She sipped hot cappuccino, decided she would leave the butts in an ashtray to remind her to talk to Melody. She looked in the fridge, but its contents gave her no especially creative ideas, so she took out some tomatoes and water and margarine to make Spanish-Style Rice-a-Roni. On the church calendar on the fridge door she saw that there were cell group meetings on Sunday. Maybe she would bake some cinnamon buns for that after supper. She swigged the last gulp but caught her breath at the same time, choked and coughed and fell over the sink, her throat blocked from letting air either in or out. Then finally it released and she could breathe and cry at the same time. When finally she had caught her breath, she realized from the music that she had missed her favourite part of the third concerto.

There was someone new at the cell group meeting, a young man named Sam, of Chinese descent. Despite his white-and-blue striped shirt and its buttoned-down collar, to Jennifer he stood out like a daffodil in a bed of tulips in the circle of whites.

"A friend of mine," Wiebe said in introduction. "Wanted to visit this group I'm always talking about." Smiles all around the Huisman's pastel living room. Wiebe was tall even when sitting down, a chartered accountant with grey hair and mustache.

"Wiebe makes creedal study sound so subversive," said Sam in perfect English. He seemed to grin even while talking, punctuating his words with a self-mocking laugh, breathing in, not out. The others were holding back, not sure how to take this stranger.

"Maybe," said Wiebe, "we could go around once and say our names, so Sam will know what to call us?" Sam, pen and paper at the ready, actually wrote down all the names.

"Tonight we're continuing our study of the Canons of Dort, articles fourteen through

eighteen," said John Huisman, smiling stiffly at Sam, calling the group to order. John was also a deacon like Wiebe, and also wore a mustache, but he was thinner, younger. He went on, "But first I'd like to open in prayer."

Jennifer bowed her face into her hands, but through her fingers she saw that Sam did not: he kept his eyes open during the prayer, staring at the ceiling, where the wallpaper's pastel yellow and green abstract designs ended.

Sam invited Jennifer to a baseball scrimmage the following Saturday with some friends of his at Mercer Street Park, next to a school a few blocks from her home. Walking down the sidewalk, Jennifer surveyed the familiar dilapidations of yards and lawns that needed cutting. The grass on the school field, on the other hand, was trampled to death at the corner where all the kids left the sidewalk to walk along a fence overgrown and overhung by cedars. Ahead Jennifer saw a curly-haired preschooler in a striped shirt facing into the cedars, leaning back and pissing an arc of golden urine onto a pile of refuse or some kind of shag rug against the fence—no! it was a sheepdog, just standing there, taking it. Jennifer's throat constricted, and she ran up to grab the boy's arm.

"Stop that this instant!" she shouted, shaking him, surprised at the volume of her own voice, but he had already as soon as he had sensed her approach. The dog suddenly regained its agency and bounded off. The boy's face turned upwards to hers was blank. It was one of the Boersma kids, she recognized him from church. Wasn't his name Michael?

"That's dirty!" She spluttered. "You wouldn't want the dog to do that to you, would you?"

He shook his head. A stone's throw away the dog stopped and shook itself.

"Finish peeing over there, and don't you ever do that again!" She gave him a fierce

glare. "You know better than to do that in a public place." He finished, making a bubbly froth on the hard ground, and meekly tucked up his track pants.

"Do you know whose dog that is?" she asked, moving on.

He just looked at her.

Coming around the corner of the school, Jennifer saw five cars parked in the lot and a dozen people already on the field throwing a ball around. Sam was there, in a Tigers cap and royal blue T-shirt. He wore a right-handed glove, and waved with his left when he saw her.

He introduced her to everybody, other accountants and some secretaries and spouses, and she felt at home right away. She hadn't played since high school, but thankfully it was softball and the pitching was not too fast. The bat was an aluminum one, which helped even her weak hits make it to the outfield. The *conk!* was such a strange sound.

In the seventh inning she was playing shortstop, and a burly farmer's-daughter type drove a line drive straight at her and she reacted too slowly. *Ooosh!* Right in the stomach, leaving her crumpled up, terrifyingly unable to breathe.

She sensed a crowd around her, and then Sam was at her side. At last, a shallow, halting breath. And another. "I'm okay, I'm okay," she gasped. Arms helped her to a spot against the bleachers, gave her some Gatorade. She could breathe again, see again, but both hurt, her eyes watering and her stomach and lungs burning.

"Let me take you home, okay?" Sam asked.

"No, I'm alright," she said, forcing a smile. "Really."

After the game, he did take her home in his Honda Accord. Melody was there, and ended up playing the overprotective nurse, laying her down on the couch, bustling around to bring out drinks and cookies.

They sat in the chairs beside her, drinking orange juice. Jennifer said little, fell into a kind of daze, but Sam and Melody talked animatedly. Sam asked about her CD collection, and Melody showed it to him. They put on The Proclaimers and discussed pop music, Scottish, Irish, Celtic. . . .

Later, Sam nodded his head in the direction of the fridge. "Do you really believe all that doctrine about being predestined, like everybody said at cell group?" He must have seen her Bible on top. He looked at Jennifer with that disturbing grin.

Not wanting to frighten him off, Jennifer croaked a 'no'. Melody laughed.

"We both had the predestination to be born into one of the most conservative churches around. Since we didn't get enough of it there most of us go for at least a year to a liberal arts college founded by the church." She of course had moved on to the university.

The next time Jennifer saw Sam was at a party Trish organized when her parents were away. Truus asked Jennifer to go to keep an eye on things "and maybe help out a little." Sam and Melody showed up with a contingent of artsies, and Jennifer spent the evening in the kitchen, helping Trish and just hiding out. She felt guilty about what she had said to Sam after the baseball game, but calmed herself by pouring drinks, crushing ice in a dishtowel with a kitchen mallet, stocking chip bowls, washing glasses. . . . She made small talk with Trish and with some of the women who came in to lend a hand, but it left her feeling empty, stifled. She decided she needed a new job, new friends, a new environment, something. . . . She ought to be a better person than she was.

By midnight she felt she had at least done her part for Truus, and went to get her coat from the hall closet. She could hear them around the corner in the living room: Melody and her friends. Several female voices were arguing about IVCF, a student group for Evangelicals

Melody belonged to at university.

An exasperated male voice: "Okay, how do you define taking advantage of someone?" Was that Sam? She quickly headed for the back screen door, opening it quietly to leave.

Other male and female voices, unfamiliar.

". . . see for yourselves. . . ." Melody again. Always Melody.

The church choir sang in the morning service the following Sunday, one set of songs before the children left for Sunday school (she saw several curly heads that might have been the Boersmas' boy) and another set after, as an interlude while the elements of the Lord's Supper were being passed around on trays by the elders. Pastor Gerry preached on the wise and foolish builders, an irritatingly simple message without the scholarly approach Jennifer had learned to prefer in college (he called it a meditation, saying he had to keep it short because there were so many special contributions to the service). She found herself folding and refolding the bulletin into a square and fighting to get the edges of the different pages to line up.

While the elements were being passed, the choir sang a hymn.

How lovely is thy dwelling
O Lord o-of hosts to me
My heart i-is longing, fainting
thy dwelling place to see.

It came to a peaceful conclusion. But then, suddenly, there was an audible *crack* from somewhere outside the sanctuary and the sound of children running. The fire alarm went off, a sort of slow, tinny *clang, clang* from a bell in the sanctuary and a simultaneous, continuous ringing from somewhere else in the building. The choir members remained frozen, and the congregation too, and then everyone began craning their necks. The secretary and several church staff got up and left, not running but walking purposefully. Some others left, too.

Jennifer imagined they had seen the scene in *Backdraft* in which the fireman smashes the driver's side windows with an axe to get illegally parked cars out of the way.

Pastor Gerry stood up from the chair to the side of the stage where he sat when not at the pulpit. "Let's just remain calm," he said, smiling weakly. "I'm pretty sure it's not a fire."

The bell rang and rang, each impact of the hammer on the slower bell seeming to resonate in Jennifer's stomach where it was bruised, to echo louder and louder in her ears, until her discomfort seemed unbearable. Kids were covering and uncovering their ears with delight. Other people were looking around uneasily. Jennifer had a crazy urge to jump up and run down the aisle, up the steps, to Pastor Gerry's side. Imagine the astonishment, the censure. *Girl, please, all things decently and in good order!* Who was she to want to take Pastor Gerry away from the service to talk with her, leaving the rest of the congregation unshepherded, without a focal point? The continuous bell shut off for a few seconds, then kicked back in again. The minutes dragged before the appropriate circuits were closed, to exaggerated sighs of relief. Things went back to normal, and Pastor Gerry led in the conclusion of the sacrament and the end of the service.

On Monday, back at work, people talked about it over coffee and out on the gravel. *I almost fell off the risers*, said Joan, who sang soprano in the choir. *It's a wonder none of the seniors had a heart attack*, said someone else. To Jennifer, looking back, it felt like a missed opportunity.

## Fading in

Lucas Glazier arrived thirty minutes early for his first day of work at Sovereign College only to find himself locked out of the darkened suite of offices. He contemplated going away for a few minutes, perhaps in search of a coffee, but to his relief the decision was preempted by the entrance of a short, sturdy janitor woman perhaps in her fifties briskly pushing a cart up the tiled corridor, a black kerchief covering her hair. She almost pushed the cart into him.

"Oh, sorry!" she exclaimed, bobbing, flustered, lapsing into a few words which could have been Spanish. She came to a halt looking at his feet and clicked her tongue twice before he defensively followed her gaze—he could see nothing wrong with his taupe oxfords. She was all in black, which made his beige slacks and tweed jacket seem pale. When he brought up his eyes, hers returned his gaze, her head cocked slightly, her face marked by wrinkles and swarthy blotches. Then she was looking down and producing a jingle of keys.

"No, it's. . . . I'm. . . ." he began feebly, but she dismissed his words with a wave, brusquely unlocked the glass door, went in, and snapped on the office lights, forcing Lucas to squint. He half expected censure or complaint, but instead she turned to him and cracked a smile that went against the lines of her face. Her teeth were small and irregular and slightly yellow.

"Work hard," she said, patting his shoulder, and then headed down the corridor.

"Uh, thank you," Lucas called.

She didn't turn, but called ahead, "Don't worry."

Right, he thought. How was he going to explain his entrance into the office without getting her into trouble? The situation felt familiar, but if it had happened before he retained

no memory of how it had been resolved. Maybe if he said nothing, no one would notice. He put down his briefcase and undid the round leather buttons on his new jacket, looking over the space of empty desks in an unfocused way. The door and the neighbouring wall were mostly glass, and he turned to his reflection to check his appearance, but there was a glare and he couldn't see much. He felt that perhaps he should go find a bathroom and comb his hair.

A door banged in the hall, and he leaned out to look: someone else was arriving, a woman hunched over and struggling with two piles of videocassettes in her arms.

"Oh, Luke, catch these, please, before they get away from me!" she called out. He had not seen her look up from her burdens, but no one else was in sight, so he ran to meet her halfway. She proffered one of the stacks, which he extricated, lining up the cassettes inside his arms.

"Thank you, thanks," she said, standing straighter, adjusting a clunky leather shoulder bag. She looked him in the face, smiled briefly, and led him into the office and through a maze of unpartitioned desks to one near the back wall. She was wearing a red suede coat, and her brown hair was cropped at the back so that her neck showed above her collar. "Just put them on Tineke's desk, here," she said, straightening her own stack as she deposited it. He did so.

"Luke Glazier," he said questioningly, feeling stupid.

For a moment the crisp features of her face softened. "Oh, sorry, I'm Lucinda Morrison, office manager. Glad to have you aboard, Luke."

The rest of the week Luke spent the first hour every day with Lucinda, going over past Public Relations strategies and "just getting to know each other." Whenever she addressed his job and his responsibilities, she focused her gaze on him so that it made him

fidget and want to turn aside: she looked *through* him as though analyzing some lint or dandruff on the back of his chair. She reassured him that most of the time she would leave him more or less on his own, for which he was effusively thankful. He was given the office next to hers in a ring of walled-off rooms around the open central office area. Both rooms were light green with forest green accents and large windows; hers had a painting of a garden, several shelves of reference books, and a desk picture he later found was of her and her husband astraddle a fallen tree. She let Luke know he would be doing some of her correspondence, which was fine—he liked the feeling of composing a good letter and then giving it to someone else to sign. Her butterfly signature was much nicer than his own.

After four mornings he had learned quite a bit about Lucinda's husband, Dan, a cabinet maker, and their frustrated attempts at adoption. Either Lucinda was like this with everyone or she trusted him from the start, for she made repeated enigmatic references to her private life. Feeling it would be rude to let them pass, Luke always made a polite comment or inquiry that ended up provoking another story.

Lucinda also used up several of her coffee breaks to show him around, explaining where various supplies were kept, how the copier and fax were shared with people from other departments, how the networking system for the laser printer worked, how expenses were to be recorded and a number of things that he nodded his head about and immediately forgot. Lucinda introduced him as "the new man in PR" to some of the secretaries and finance people, who responded as one with warm handshakes and invitations to go out for a beer or to attend a Bible study group on the book of Acts on Wednesday evenings at eight. Luke refused, surprised anew and awkward each time, pleading "unpacking duties."

His evenings were quiet. He did spend some time at first giving some order to his things—kitchen things, mostly, because he liked to cook. He experimented with recipes from

a cookbook his brother Ken had given him—fish and rice, Greek salads with feta cheese and black olives, stew with couscous, casseroles with eggplant—while listening to the radio, to the news at first and then to a station that played a jazz program. Sometimes he read from a historical novel about Johannes Kepler, once he wrote a letter to his parents in Willowdale, and sometimes he tried to form an opinion of his new job. He liked the privacy of his own office, he decided, but he remained unsure about Lucinda. He continued to arrive early for work; sometimes the janitor woman let him in, sometimes she didn't come and he would sit on the hall bench for a while, reading his book. He was overwhelmed by the way she sometimes took his hand in both of hers when she greeted him. Though the idea had come to him several times, he had not yet inquired as to the possibility of getting his own key. Maybe he wouldn't bother.

His first project was to revise fifteen pamphlets for one of the college's recruitment displays, which meant familiarizing himself with on-file materials and interviewing department heads. He didn't mind the reading, but he dreaded the interviews. He wanted to do them by phone, but Lucinda recommended he take pictures of each person, if not for the brochures then to update the files.

He scheduled his first interview with a physical education instructor named James Menninga. There were no full professors yet in the P. E. department, and the one assistant prof was on sabbatical. Mr. Menninga turned out to be not much older than Luke. He was tall and wore a moustache, and proffered a broad, steady hand. On his finger was a bulky gold-coloured ring with a large amethyst stone.

"Pleased to meet you," said Luke. "Is . . . is that a Calvin College ring?"

"Yessiree, boy!" he quipped, exaggerating his Midwestern accent so that "boy" sounded like "bo-ah" and displaying the ring. There were black hairs growing from the back

of his fingers. "Ever been there?"

Luke shook hands and shook his head. Menninga tilted his head quizzically. "That's Graaaand Rapids, Michigan, there, Luke. Mecca if you're Dutch or Christian Reformed."

"My brother went to the University of Michigan," Luke said, then wished he hadn't.

"What was his name? When did he go? Maybe I met him."

"Ken. Kenneth Glazier. He graduated maybe three or four years ago."

"Ken? Sure, I met Ken. He was a sprinter, played hockey and volleyball."

"Yup. That's him." Ken had been a star athlete in high school and college, setting at least two records in high jump and long jump, and winning Most Valuable Player in hockey and volleyball. Ken engraved the name Glazier as a synonym for "gifted athlete" in the minds and on the plaques of many school authorities. Lucas, afraid to disappoint such men, let them talk him into trying out, even though he knew it would give them greater hopes and greater disappointments. At least after several below-average finishes, the decision would be final and clear. For college Luke had gone away to Ryerson, a place where no one had heard of Ken. Though it was not that far from his parents' home, he moved out and boarded with his Aunt Martha and Uncle Henk, in a basement apartment recently vacated by their youngest son Jim, who had found a construction job somewhere in Alberta.

Mr. Menninga had a big smile for Luke now. "So you're Ken's brother, eh? Small world. You ever visit Michigan?" Luke shook his head. "America there. Big difference from here, you know. Take Grand Rapids—I got robbed there once on my way home from a party. Couple toughs on the street asked for my wallet. I said, 'No way, man!' Well, that was a tussle, let me tell you, stupid thing to do." He chuckled. "Broke my arm, I was out of commission for twelve weeks, all for ten dollars and some ID. That's the difference. Up here you can stay stupid and never know it." He laughed again. "Anyway, I suppose you have

some questions for me right? Good thing you warned me in advance about the picture, so's I could comb my hair and everything." He laughed again, put his hand to his forehead like a salute and looked out into the distance, posing. Luke laughed.

"Well, I'm trying to write up a profile of the P. E. program to attract new students." Luke bent down, opened his briefcase a crack and pulled out his notebook and pen, noticing a pair of muddy cleats in the corner by the wall.

By Friday he had done three interviews, scheduled five more and was hoping he could finish the job by the end of the next week.

As he was leaving he found himself holding the door for Lucinda and as a result followed directly behind her to the parking lot.

"You're coming to the party tonight, right?" she asked.

Luke stopped. "No, I—"

"You can't still be unpacking!"

"Well, no. . . ." He drew a blank.

"Do come. You can always leave if you don't like it."

"Alright," he said, which brought a smile to her face. "Maybe I'll see you there."

The party was at the home of Jennifer Vandyke, a receptionist who teased him about eating his lunch in his office every day. She called him Lacklustre Luke or (with a twang) Lonesome Luke. He had to park one hundred metres down the street from her house, and the September breeze was surprisingly cold. She answered the door in a peach dress he had seen her wear earlier that week.

"Come on in, Luke. You didn't have to ring the bell, you should know that," she said, over a din of male voices and piano music.

"I brought you some wine."

"Thank you. That is decidedly un-lacklustre, um, decidedly . . . lustrous of you. Thank you." She smiled easily and turned to put the bottle on the carpeted stairs, then took his jacket. The clink of glasses and loud, female laughter caused him to look up into the living room crowded with standing and sitting people. He could see a red-gold watercolour landscape painting. Jennifer said something into the closet where she was hanging his coat, but he couldn't make it out because he felt like he was going to sneeze—it passed. There was a disorderly pile of shoes at the foot of the stairs, so he removed his own and left them together on the edge of the first step.

Jennifer took his hand and dragged him through the crowd to the kitchen, Luke nodding his head to greetings from people along the way.

"Help yourself to those little quiches there, you'll like them."

Hors d'œuvres were arrayed on serving plates across the counter, and Luke chose a pastry cup filled with yellow-green egg. He bit off half and, enjoying it, wondered at Jennifer's ability to guess his tastes. He looked up, but she had been caught in conversation by Janice, the secretary who worked across from the laser printer. Another knot of people spilled in behind him from the living room, and Jennifer left into the dining room in a direction pointed out by Janice, apparently to correct some gap in her hostessing.

Janice came over directly to Luke. "Has anyone said that you remind them of Robert Zemekis?" Luke shook his head. "Robert was the first guy who had your job, about five years ago. He built the PR department—with Helen—from almost nothing. I think you're almost the spitting image sometimes, and you're both so outgoing. Same blond hair, same—" she looked into his face, "same blue eyes."

"My hair's more . . . reddish, don't you think?" he asked. "We've always thought of it

as red in my family."

"Oh, really? I suppose you might call it strawberry blond."

He didn't say anything about his eyes, which his family had always considered green. Perhaps it was the lighting in the room.

He drifted out to the back patio where some of the men from finance were gathered around a flaming log of wood on the barbecue. They were all drinking Blue, so he tried to hold his hand over the label of his can of Sprite.

Jeff said "Hi" to him softly, but everyone's attention remained focused on Richard, who was telling a story.

"—and then," he paused to look around, "our fish finder broke!" There was laughter all around. "Can you believe it? So the next day we took it into town, but it was truly shot, and getting it fixed would have cost more than the three hundred bucks they were charging for the new one they had there in the window." A few slow whistles and mutters. "Well, we hummed and hawed and went outside for a smoke—well, Lennie had a smoke, I breathed it in second hand—and finally we left without it."

"Which was just as well," broke in Len, sitting on the picnic table at his left, "because that night we bought one from some old guy we met in the bathrooms. He said he didn't use it much anymore and would be willing to part with it for a hundred dollars if we wouldn't mind taking him out with us the next day, which we did. . . ."

Luke let his mind wander into Len's bushy grey beard and lost the thread of the story. He admired a well-groomed beard—maybe someday he would grow one. Len was tall and thin like a biology professor while Richard was beefy, wore thick glasses and short hair, almost a brush cut. They were the old guard in the office and reportedly adept at practical

jokes, which made them staff favourites among the students.

Luke went to find Jennifer, and saw her sitting with a group of secretaries. He got another mini-quiche and ate it as he walked over to them. The women sensed his presence and the conversation ran down. Luke wondered if others saw him as this Robert fellow.

"It was pretty nice of you to have us all over," he said, into the pause.

"Yah, that's right Jenn," someone added, to murmurs of agreement. "This must be—what, the third time, right?"

"Well, when you've got a big old house like this you can do this sort of thing, I guess," said Jennifer.

"Do you live here all by yourself?" asked Luke, wanting to take back the words as soon as he had spoken them.

"Well, there's usually someone in the apartment downstairs, a university student right now, but she's gone for the weekend."

"Oh."

There was a pause and then Luke said, "Well, I just wanted to say thanks. I'll see you on Monday."

"You're welcome. Bye."

"Bye, Luke." A chorus of calls.

The next week Luke got another invitation, this one from—of all people—the janitor woman. He had finished reading his novel and was trying to imagine what it could have been like to grow up in a family with divorced parents when she entered, a black bundle of purpose. She came straight for him.

"You come for dinner tomorrow night, okay?" She pressed a piece of paper into his hand with her address printed in pencil before he could express his surprise. "Good meal, you can meet my sons." She was flushed. "Seven o'clock?"

"Uh, sure. Yes. That would be great." He had become more used to the accent and didn't miss any words.

"Hm hm." Her voice rose and fell, and she was moving again before he realized it, doing her march with the cart down the corridor, wheels clicking with each tile.

The house was at the other end of town, so he took the ring road and re-entered the city from the north, passing warehouses, auto-body shops, and a motel with a statue of a rampant white stallion. He turned left by a section of townhouses and slowed to find the number, moving through the newer townhouses into a neighbourhood of bungalow-style homes built in the fifties. Two Buick Regals, one recently repainted, were parked on the road in front of the house. His car fit into the driveway behind a huge Parisienne. He went to the side door of the house and knocked.

It was opened by a dark, brawny male with shoulder-length hair, maybe in his late twenties. "Hey, come on in. You must be the guy from the college."

"Yeah, Lucas. My name's Lucas."

"Well, the kitchen's right up here. You can say hi to Mama and then we'll sit out in the sunroom." He was already halfway down a short flight of stairs, but he stopped and turned. "I'm Joseph, by the way." He had a massive head and chin and nose, and his grin was proportionately huge.

Mama, wearing a gold-coloured apron over her usual black dress, was wiping her hands on a towel. She was wearing sandals.

"Good to see you." She hugged his arm. "Tonight Joseph asked for fettucini—I hope

you like it? It's not Portuguese, but maybe another time."

"It sounds great," he said.

"My other son is Luis, he's outside with Rocky, the dog."

The former back kitchen window looked down into the sunroom, an addition on the back of the house, where Joseph was setting the table with a young woman with blonde hair. Luke went to join them.

"This is Anita, my wife," Joseph explained.

"Hi," she said, raising thick black eyebrows.

"Hi, I'm Lucas."

The dinner proved to be simple but superb, a fresh caesar salad and then heaps of steaming green pasta with alfredo sauce. Luis, who seemed younger than Joseph (though not smaller), fetched a bottle of wine, Chianti, which Lucas found delightful and which made him vow to himself that he would buy some. Joseph and Luis joked easily, teasing Mama and Anita and Lucas about how little they ate. Lucas hesitantly joined in by referring to Joseph as "Alfredo", which got a startled laugh from Anita and then everyone else. They asked him about his job, and Mama apologetically sketched how she organized her route of bathrooms, floors, classrooms, and garbage cans at the college. "I have keys to everything," she said, "you ever need to break in, you give me a call." Lucas told them the story of his grandfather, who had immigrated in the 1920s and worked ten years in construction before he could take out a loan and open his own shoe repair, the Glazier Shoe Repair in Toronto.

After dinner was cleared away (everyone seemed to be pitching in, so Lucas did, too), Joseph and Luis fetched a trumpet with a mute and a euphonium and played a few songs, hamming themselves up with expressions of exaggerated effort. Mama laughed and apologized weakly to Lucas, who protested that there was no need for an apology. Then they

all moved up to the living room where there was an upright piano, and Anita played an energetic piece "from Argentina". Mama sat back in an armchair and took it all in.

At the next office party at Doug's place outside the city, Lucas sat back from the fire and listened to Jennifer talk with Glenda and Nel and a few others about last year's mainstage play at the college, *The Doll's House*. They seemed to have been acquainted with the actors from various classes, and to derive much of their pleasure from character typecasting. Jennifer's boarder Melody had apparently acted in it before she transferred to university.

The only play Lucas had ever been involved in was his high school's mounting of *The Lady's Not for Burning*, for which his pretentious English teacher, Mr. Janssens, had recruited him to prepare ads and promotional leaflets for door-to-door delivery to houses around the school. Lucas also compiled and typed up the program for the printer and helped silkscreen T-shirts with Chris, who had become a friend—his first close friend. Before the play, Lucas had run into him a number of times in the men's room, where he often found himself during noon hour. Chris' dad was a plumber, and when Lucas met Chris again after the play he somehow found himself being lectured on the outmoded metal and ceramic fixtures with which the place was outfitted. Chris was now studying computer science at Waterloo, and they still wrote letters once in a while.

Later, by the food table, one of the accountants let slip that Luke reminded him of his predecessor Zemekis, which made him feel like he was walking in Ken's shadow again. Near the end of the party Lucinda, who seemed to retain her managerial role even outside the office, stood upon a chair and announced that the next party, to be held at her home, would be a "Christmas in November" party, which would include a talent show. Perfect, thought Lucas, here was an opportunity for him to make his own impression—if only he were the type of

person to do so.

The next time he visited the Da Cunha family, Lucas and Anita dried dishes together. She explained to him that the Da Cunhas had immigrated in the late fifties, first Mr. Da Cunha and later the rest of the family. Mr. Da Cunha had been a construction worker, but had died in an accident. Luis and another brother, Tony, normally lived at home with Mama, but Tony was up north helping his cousin on a hospital renovation project. Afterwards, in the hallway, trying to remember which door was the bathroom, Lucas noticed for the first time a large lithograph of a well-haloed Jesus.

After dishes everyone drifted into the living room to talk. Somehow, he wasn't sure how, Lucas stumbled onto the subject of the Christmas party and ended up asking them for ideas. They suggested a musical number, and after a good deal of wine they decided he would do a medley with their accompaniment.

As November approached, it became apparent in their two practice sessions that Joseph and Luis were better at comic improvisation than straight performance, and Lucas, caught halfway between having fun and wanting to call it off, considered asking for Anita alone.

The night of the party Lucas wore his best jacket, the one he had worn to work that first day. The Da Cunhas arrived with Mama on the dot of eight, and the four of them sat huddled at one end of the living room sofa, a number of people staring while Joseph and Luis unpacked their instruments. Lucas brought them a party tray with slices of cake.

"Thank you very much," Mama said to Lucas. "It's a nice house, here, a nice party." Lucas smiled and sat on his haunches, talking with the clan about childhood music lessons. The late Mr. Da Cunha had played tuba in a Portuguese brass band, and had taught the boys until high school. Lucas told them the story of his flute lessons with a matronly Englishwoman, lessons he had dropped when he had realized it was not considered cool.

Before long Lucinda was calling everybody into the living room-dining room to start the talent show.

"Just you come and see. I'm going to make a great fool of myself," she exclaimed, flushed.

John Vaandering of Stewardship Services opened the show with "Heart of Gold," head down over his acoustic guitar. Lucinda's three songs by Rogers and Hammerstein, with Janice at piano, were funny and playful, her face a carnival of expressions. There was a skit by the secretaries about a "street person" and a rich woman, where the woman sat as far as possible from the street person at the other end of the bench at the bus stop, and touched up her make-up. The street person mimicked her with whatever she could find from the garbage: orange peel for foundation, ketchup for lipstick, coal for eyeliner, more ketchup for blush. Then it was Lucas' turn.

Anita took over the piano, and they did the first song unannounced: "Dust in the Wind." Lucas sang with his eyes on the line where the plaster ceiling met the gold wallpaper. When it was over he looked into the familiar faces and received a few smiles and some polite applause.

"Thank you," said Lucas. Mama, standing in the back, winked at him. "My name is Lucas, and these are the three Da Cunhas." Luis and Joseph came forward from the back, processing with a brief oom-pa-pa on the euphonium. Then they broke into a few lines of an Oktoberfest-style drinking song, bringing cheers from Len and Richard and some men near them, which in turn made Lucas brave enough to fake a few phrases of what he imagined drunken German would sound like. The whole thing clattered to a halt, and then they launched into their version of "Istanbul (Not Constantinople)":

*Istanbul was Constantinople*
*Now it's Istanbul not Constantinople*

*Why did Constantinople get the works?*
*Why, that's nobody's business but the Turks.*

*Even old New York was once New Amsterdam*
*Why they changed it, I can't say*
*People just liked it better that way*

*Now take me back to Constantinople*
*No, you can't go back to Constantinople*
*Been a long time gone, Constantinople*
*Why did Constantinople get the works?*
*That's nobody's business but the Turks.*

*Istanbul . . . Istanbul*

People laughed at this one, and Lucas and the Da Cunhas concluded with a drastically slowed-down version of "Jump," turning the rock song into happy lounge-pop. Lucas did not know what to do in the final applause, so he bowed.

The Monday after, back at the office, someone had taped a piece of paper on his door with an arrow to his name plate, so that it read:

Lucas Glazier, Public Relations
⇑
Istanbul

At lunch he was on his way to sit outside when Janice rushed over. "You were great! The whole thing was just a riot, just like something Zemekis would do." She thrust an envelope into his hands. "Doug took pictures. Drop them in his box after you're done."

He sat outside on the grass and began a sandwich of rye and havarti. The pictures were good. Doug seemed to have a knack for catching people at unusual moments: Lucinda flushed and standing on a chair, John playing guitar, even himself. He was halfway through his sandwich when Mama appeared at the door and came out towards him. Outside the black

of her clothes seemed less severe.

"The party, it was very fine." She had stopped but was shifting her weight from one leg to the other and back again.

"Good, I'm glad you thought so. I had a great time doing those songs with Luis and Joseph."

She was quiet, then asked: "When you are done your lunch, can you help me with something?"

"I can help you now," he said, getting to his feet.

She led him inside and down a side hallway to a door without a handle, where she produced her key ring and opened the door on a dark, windowless room. She pulled a string to switch on a bulb, and he saw it was a deep cement room with a sloped ceiling: a janitorial storage area with shelves of odds and ends and a deep, stained sink with a faucet ending in a rubber hose. The air was cool and damp.

She walked over to a row of shelves and from behind a box of paper towels produced a bottle. "It's wine," she said in an exaggerated whisper, rolling her eyes. "We're not supposed to drink here, but it's okay, just a little bit." She poured him half a glass in a styrofoam cup, and then did the same for herself. "This was made by Luis. I wanted you to try some. If you like it, I will give you a bottle."

"Why thank you," said Lucas. "I don't know what to say. You are so kind to me."

She smiled, and he remembered that smile when she had let him into the office on his first day. "To your new career, Lucas."

"And to your health," he responded. "May you and your family live long in this land." The wine was red and quite dry. Lucas remembered his lunch, and broke his cheese sandwich and gave her a piece. Her hand, when he touched it, was remarkably warm.

## Doesn't What You Used to Watch Embarrass You?

Saturday nights were bath night at our house when I was a girl: baths and chores or homework for one and all and then a couple hours of TV all together, with Mom hustling together a major snack between the eight and nine o'clock shows or else in stages during commercials. Even when she stopped, she never really stopped. I've learned my lesson from that, let me tell you: my girls fix their own snacks, or we don't have any.

Not that Mom was lax and let us off without chores. Every day she would pick one of us to help her clear the table and scrape the leftover potatoes or roast beef or casserole into plastic yoghurt containers, shake out the red tablecloth from the porch and dry the dishes. Without fail, just as soon as all this was started, Dad would saunter through from the bathroom on his way downstairs and they would hug and kiss each other. Or Mom would say, "Hey Wietse, where's my kiss?" if he pretended to forget. He would fake embarrassment or say that he smelled like chicken shit and they would laugh, but they would always get just as close and put their arms all the way around each other. All of us kids went through that stage when you whine and complain and cover your eyes at such "mushy-ness", but Mom and Dad just ignored us. After the kiss Dad would disappear into his workshop or the barn, and it was back to the bustle with a vengeance for Mom. She could wash so fast you could never keep up with her, and we would complain. She always had the same answer: "Dishes is one of the things I'm best at—dishes and sleeping." You'd think she was lazy to listen to her, but she worked harder than any woman I've ever known—harder than me, now, that's for sure. In the city with just three girls, no farm dirt—it's nothing compared to what she coped with.

The cheap *Mir* dish soap would go from the sink to the bathroom, where a few squirts would make suds for the bath. Usually the bath order was determined by cleanliness: the

cleaner kids would go first and get the most bubbles to play with, which usually meant Dad, who'd spent the day in the barn, would be last. We used the same tub of water, slightly sulphurous well-water that left an indelible pastel-green stain in the enamel by the drain, four or five of us before it got dirty enough to be changed. That's one of the things that still gets me. Not that my parents were cheap—they were immigrants who had grown up in the Netherlands in wartime. But I mean, well, I'm amazed how we never questioned anything until we left home. Most girls get paranoid about hygiene way before they get their first monthly—I mean, I *know*, I've got three girls now—eight, ten, and eleven—and if I didn't use an egg timer to cut short their showers there'd never be any hot water in the tank. Of course I used to complain if the suds were all gone or the water was murky, but I never really considered raising a real stink. It was only after I went away to college that I realized other families didn't share bathwater. My daughters, now, they give me ultimatums about having to have a silk shirt or L. A. Gear shoes or me not letting them go to dances until they're sixteen. Don't get me wrong, they're great girls, well behaved most of the time, affectionate to me and Herman, but man! they want so much, so badly—whatever their friends have, whatever they see on TV. Maybe that's why lately I've been thinking back to when I was that age—things have changed a lot.

My girls think I'm some Cro-Magnon hold-over, but then again they think anything before the eighties is ancient history, except maybe the sixties. I'm a little strict with them about some things, but I'm doing it for their own good. My parents had rules too, and they worked hard and built up the church pretty good, but when it came to certain things they weren't careful enough, and I've learned from that. Like TV for instance, I don't think they ever really had an idea of what an effect it has on children. Mom and Dad tried to keep an eye on it, and they had a rule that it wasn't officially allowed to come on until eight o'clock,

but sometimes on a Saturday Dad would have had his bath early or else he'd be putting it off until eight, and then he would sit in his chair and watch a seven o'clock show called *Solid Gold*. It's a shame to remember it (and not something my girls need to know). The show was a countdown of the top pop songs with disco dancers doing dances to them, and it was always keying in to the lustful aspects of songs, like music videos today. I don't know how Dad couldn't see that. I suppose he thought it was harmless: tightly-clothed women and men doing choreographed numbers to Olivia Newton John or Lionel Ritchie, Fleetwood Mac, Journey, the Bee Gees, Tom Jones—it's amazing how many of the names I can remember. They'd only play a segment from a given song, and when the segment ended the dancers would freeze in some sexual, half-artistic pose, with mist or a coloured light framing them. They would try to hold still, but in the few moments when the camera rested on them you could see them breathing heavily, and you knew that the dancing was so taxing it would have been impossible for them to really feel the kind of sexual attraction they mimed and that the songs were about. The Solid Gold Dancers never talked; there were just the recorded voices of the singers during the songs, and two announcers. I wonder what it was like to be a dancer like that, not to have a voice. The announcers: Marilyn McCoo was the female one, I heard a few years ago she's become a gospel singer now (she was in between brown and white), and I think the guy was Andy Gibb, one of the Bee Gees' brothers.

If you don't think there's anything funny about watching a show like this, it's because you don't know my dad very well. My dad was an elder in the church almost his entire life, Mr. Respectability. Not only that, he hated rock music. I could tell you a dozen stories about all the fights he had with my brothers about playing music in the house. The other day I did come up with one thing to explain it: he did have the radio in the barn tuned to an easy-listening station. But the problem is, that was just background music. "Good for the

chickens," he used to say. "Don't listen to the words myself." And in most parts of the barn the chickens made so much racket you couldn't hear well enough to make out the words anyway. Well, whatever he thought about the words, I'm stumped as to what he thought about what this show promoted. Obviously he didn't think there was anything embarrassing about watching it, because he never did anything to stop us kids from watching with him—we'd just slip over quietly so my mom wouldn't order us to finish our homework first. Sometimes I'd sit on his lap, or one of the others would. I've never talked to him about it, it's so long ago now, but once my brother Len and I were talking about how awful it was when you hit puberty in our house and he told me that he used to have sexual thoughts about those dancers. I couldn't believe it. That was when I started thinking about what a sexist show it was, and making sure I set a better example. I hadn't thought of it for years, and then all of a sudden it came up and now I think, man, it's a good thing we weren't allowed to watch on other nights.

I remember, too, that Mom used to come in from the kitchen sometimes and look in on us, to make sure whichever kids were watching had indeed completed their homework for Monday. Once she stood in the doorway watching some dance number with us, and then she laughed and said, "You know why your father likes this show? He likes all those scantily clad women." Her tone was strange, but when I looked at Dad he was just grinning at her, as if to say, "Who, me?" She even winked at him, if I remember right. I'm not sure, but I wouldn't put it past her, that was the kind of woman she was.

Those evenings were family time for us, we all sat together and drank hot chocolate with marshmallows in the winter or else tea or orange juice and cookies or Rice Krispie squares that Mom had made. And what did we watch? *Solid Gold*, *The Dukes of Hazard*, and then *Dallas*. I mean, I have better standards for what my girls watch than my parents even

did. In *my house*, music videos are entirely unwelcome. I tell the girls that they can do what they want when they move out, but that in my house they will have to learn to get by without such trash, and that I hope that by the time they do move out they will have no use for it and realize just how sinful it is.

What was *The Dukes of Hazard* about? It was a caricature of Southerners—white Southerners, mind you, no blacks that I remember—making moonshine, working on their cars, making fools of the incompetent sheriff, Roscoe P. Coltrane, and the fat little businessman that ran the town, Boss Hogg. Bo and Luke Duke lived together with their sister, Daisy, who wore short shorts and halter tops or shirts with the ends tied above her belly button and was always hanging her "untouchables" on the line for Roscoe to blunder into and be flustered by while Bo and Luke were sneaking out the back, not to mention their grey-bearded Uncle Jesse, who made a single pair of overalls last through five or six seasons. There was even a time when they had a sexy poster of Daisy in the poster stand at Woolco, with bales of straw in the background. I blush when I think of it, but there was a time when I was desperate to have a body like that.

*Dallas* you probably know. It still plays in re-runs all over the world. Sometimes I flick past the French channel and there they are, the nasty ten-gallon-hat tycoon J. R. Ewing and his alcoholic ex-wife Sue Ellen, J. R.'s apple-pie brother Bobby and his wife—I forget her name, she was played by Priscilla Presley. The actress that played Miss Elly, Barbara Bel Geddes I think her name was, died of breast cancer, I heard. Anyway, she's still alive on the French channel, and I laugh at the outdated clothes they wear and the French overdubbed voice track. To believe I used to look forward to that show. . . .

Mom would come in at eight o'clock from finishing the dishes or supervising kids' baths or putting a cake in the oven for Sunday and finally all the bustle would stop. Even if

you weren't done your homework, sometimes you could even stop, too, depending on how important it was. But usually we all made sure we were done in time, so that we could watch TV with the others. I think it was easier to do homework knowing that at least one other person was busy working. But after she stopped, there we would sit, in our pyjamas, some of us flopped on the oversize cushions she made I don't know when, smelling like shampoo, the last bather maybe cutting his toenails on a spread-out newspaper.

If you missed a Saturday evening because you had to do some important homework it was excruciating. You got sent into the office, with the old roll-top desk Dad had made as a wedding present for Mom. It was always covered in papers, but Mom would clear a space and you sat there staring at the aerial picture of the farm, cold linoleum under your feet and a musty smell in your nose, with the door closed, listening to the far off sound of the television, deprived of seeing the TV the way the Solid Gold Dancers were deprived of singing, until you were done.

St. Nicholas Comes to St. Basil's

This morning, Friday, December 17, I barely make it to work on account of a big, unexpected dump of snow, as if God decided to shake out all the pillows and jeopardize the celebration of his own incarnation. Edmonton plows only a handful of the main arteries, and many people without four-by-fours either take the bus or stay home for a day and let the big wheels pack it all down. The Thursday night ITV news paraded quite an array of fender benders, mostly little student cars, and it has continued snowing all morning. But it wouldn't be fair for me to stay home, seeing as how none of the relief staff live any closer to Oakridge than I do. The bus trip is thirty-five minutes, but today there is a surprise wait at the bottom of the Walterdale Hill for some tie-up on the north side of the bridge. Sitting and waiting it comes to me that today the Immaculate kids—the kids from the home where I work, most of them the farthest from being immaculate you can imagine—are invited to a charity dinner at St. Basil's, a domed Ukrainian church a few blocks south of me. I could get out and walk to the church and wait for them there, but on the other hand they'll need at least four staff to get all the kids ready. Thank God, the bus driver—I can only see the sleeve of his blue cardigan, though I've heard him talking on his radio—makes the decision for me when he calls back, "They've cleared it up and we'll be moving again any minute."

The bus stop for work is on a street where most of the stores are vacant, but there's not much to be afraid of in the winter. A couple of blocks under big bare trees, snowfall thinning out, few people about except for some native kids without hats rolling a snowman on their lawn—either home from school early or they didn't go. The Immaculate Home is a big old brick building which shares a lot with Mary Immaculate Church. In the back there is a play area with equipment and a sandbox and basketball hoops, and you can see several sets of

train tracks through the green mesh, though the view is best from the fourth floor where the Sisters live—they're the ones who do most of the administration. The home takes in abused or neglected kids for the days, weeks, or usually months it takes for their parents to go through a rehab program or for their social worker to find a foster home. I ring the side doorbell, and it plays the first few notes of *Fur Elise*. Extra rooms have been added to the home along three sides, each ending in a security door with its own tune so that whoever is working knows which one to answer.

"Hello, Wendy." Joseph lets me in. He's an old man who volunteers at the home fixing things a couple times a week. There's usually something for him, it's an old building. We get quite a few volunteers, and donated items, too, both of which are encouraging. The Ukrainian Christmas dinner tonight is also like that: we're a charity for them. Before I can say anything he is already turning downstairs. So I call to his back: "Thanks, Joseph!", and he bobs his head. For me it's up the stairs, where opening the door makes tin bells jangle.

"Hi, Wendy!" "Hi!" Kenneth, who's eight, is already at my side: "Wendy, Wendy, we're gonna see Santa tonight, right?"

"I think so, Kenneth. Let me check, okay?" Nan and Hanna look up from behind the kitchen counter and roll their eyes—they've been here since seven. I send Kenneth over to Charys, my new shift partner, who is already busy in the craft corner helping Ben and Ryan and a group of preschoolers crayon at a low table. Ben, who's five, has fetal alcohol syndrome, his body hints at it: flattened face, no groove between his lip and his nose (no "philtrum", the VON nurse corrected me last week), he's thin and forgetful and has an extra-short attention span. He's scrunching up his face behind his thick glasses as he attacks the paper with a crayon in his fist. Charys is trying to get a protesting Ryan, who's two and refuses to use words, to make some marks on paper by putting her hand over his. The kids

around them are colouring intently. It won't last; the other staff will return with the kids from school and the TV will go on. Time for a coffee and shift exchange.

"No CIs," Hanna reports, meaning Critical Incident reports. She starts telling me about Joshua's latest. He's eight, and his parents are getting a divorce. "He threw a fit Wednesday when I told him his mother was here for a visit. I tried to tell him that I'd be there with him the whole time, but he got so upset there was nothing doing. So I went down and asked her if she could come again some other time, and she yelled at me and accused me of lying, that no son of hers would refuse to see his mummy." She shrugs her shoulders, and mouths b-i-tch, "—with a capital 'B'. I had a heck of a time getting her to leave.

"But get this: she comes back the next day, and I decide this time to try bringing him down to her as a surprise, which works fine, he's cool, and she offers to take him to West Edmonton Mall. I go along to supervise. They ride the roller coaster (you know how much *that* costs) and then he starts bugging her to get his ear pierced. I never heard him talk about that here at Immaculate, but they had obviously argued about it before. I couldn't really butt in and say no, but I made a point of saying that the staff doesn't have time to keep disinfecting his ear on top of everything else. Of course he says, 'I'll take care of it! Promise!' So. . . ."

"Great," I groan.

"Yeah, well, even that's not the end. Josh comes back proud as a peacock, but yesterday Dad shows up for a visit and when he brings Josh back: no earring. So I say, 'Hey, Josh, where's your earring?' Apparently Dad took it away and he ordered him to let the hole grow in. 'No boy of mine is ever gonna wear an earring!'—you get the picture."

I shake my head.

"I should have known. Anyway, he's still off today, already got into several fights.

Otherwise, Lee-Anne and Carol needed three time-outs before breakfast, but I warned them that Santa expected them to be good, and they behaved pretty well since. . . ." She goes on, and, still listening, I step past her and Nan for a coffee. Nan doesn't talk to me much lately. She was my shift partner for about two months until I got sick of all her complaining and asked Cathy, our director, to switch me. Nan has asthma and uses it for an excuse to get out of anything strenuous. She still lives with her parents at twenty, and she's always griping about how her mother doesn't like Jake, her boyfriend, but how he is so good to her, blah blah blah. It drove me bonkers, which is really something considering that we rarely have time to talk outside of shift exchange. Cathy announced the schedule change at last month's staff meeting as "a necessary disruption" in order to give Charys and Linda, our new staff, a chance to work with experienced staff, or something like that. "Experienced staff" is a bit of a joke, since no one but some of the Sisters have been here over three years, there are so many pregnancies, returns to school, better job offers, and who knows what. Cathy's spiel made sense, and Nan has no reason to be cool to me, but she is anyway. Which is fine by me.

Hanna's report finished, she goes back to writing logs of today's events, and I head to Cathy's tiny office. Cathy is at her desk in the crowded chaos: two walls covered like refrigerator doors with finger-painted pictures, a filing cabinet with one drawer open, a key rack, bookshelves with binders, a small window facing the tracks. I say hi and tell her why I'm late. "No problem," she says, "I'm sure there was nothing you could do. Anyway, you're earlier than the others."

"No problem," I say, "Charys is running the whole show on her own."

"She'll be okay—you think?"

"Looks that way. Hey, is that dinner still on for tonight?"

"Yep, that's what Nan told me. Kids get picked up by a bus at six."

Ranjit and Alida and then Kath arrive together in the next few minutes, having carpooled in Kath's dad's *Jimmy*, but since the other staff didn't stick around there is no time for their story as I give them the lowdown, and right away we're off to the bedrooms with our coffee mugs to set out some clothes. Both the girls' wing and the boys' wing have a closet full of clothes for formal occasions: the home has to be prepared for anything, since most of the kids arrive on short notice and sometimes don't even have shoes on. Whatever they do have is labelled, although some of the kids try to hide their "personals" to keep them from being laundered. As we lay out shirts and skirts and pants we try to remember what the kids wore last time, since often after wearing an outfit they consider it their own.

Charys will preside over the watching of *The Three Ninjas* in the TV-room and send one kid at a time to the bathroom to brush teeth and comb hair while the rest of us ferry a handful at a time to the bedrooms to get dressed.

At four o'clock I take charge of five girls between five and ten: Janine, Winnifred, Raiven, Bethany, and Heather. Bethany, the youngest, arms folded, face set, walks stiffly like a marionette and blows air through her teeth several times already in the hallway. I take the cue and ask if something is wrong. Janine is babbling to herself, Heather and Winnifred are whispering, and Raiven alone, the oldest, is walking calmly.

"Kelly 'tole my b'rett. My b'rett," says Bethany. "She said she did'n', but she did. I won't go to San'a, no San'a without my b'rett." One side of her hair, almost too short for barrettes, is done up in a pink plastic barrette, but the other side is loose.

"Wendy, Wendy, I don't want to wear a red dress, okay Wendy? Not a red one, okay?" says Heather, who's six, pale, and rarely speaks.

"Well, have a look, and see if you can find one you like," I say, sending her into the closet. I haven't laid one out for her because she's new.

"Okay, everyone undress, please," I order, closing the door behind us. Janine, who is eight but rather delayed, is sitting on her bed and sucking two fingers. "Janine, no dawdling today, okay? Take your pants off right away like a big girl, or else I'll have to do it for you. Wouldn't it be great if you could tell Santa that you got dressed all by yourself today?"

"Santa's bringing presents right?"

"I think so, but you'll only be there to get one if you get changed in a hurry."

Bethany is backing into me repeatedly so I will undo her buttons. "Who's Kelly," I ask her, "someone at school?"

She nods once, then continues to bob her head as though conducting music with her chin. "She'th a headbanger, like this," she says, bobbing vigorously.

"Stand still," I say, getting the last button. What does it mean to be a headbanger in Grade Two?

Raiven and Winnifred have actually listened to me and are extricating their ankles from their jeans, brown legs and white legs synchronized for a brief moment. "The dresses on the bed are ones you've worn before," I say to them. "Pick one you like and put it on, please."

To Bethany I ask, "How did Kelly get the barrette?"

"Fell out, and she took it and wouldn' give it back. Kelly, she wouldn' give it back!" emotions rising with the mental reenactment.

Janine is slowly twirling the leotards I put out for her.

"Janine," I say, "Santa's going to expect you to look pretty. Why don't you get changed now?"

"My uncle was Santa one year. You could tell by his voice," says Raiven scornfully. "And when he kissed you it tasted like Southern Comfort."

Heather, the pale six-year-old, has disappeared, and I find her hiding in the closet without a stitch of clothing on, shivering. "Go 'way, go 'way," she screeches suddenly.

"Come on, Heather," I say trying to be patient. "Let's put some panties on and get you a nice dress."

She flinches, and then looks up at me slowly, skinny arms covering her pelvis. "I get to wear panties this time?"

What? God. I hunch down. "Come here," I hear myself say, and I hug her. There was no indication of this in her file. "Heather, listen to me, we always wear panties here with every kind of clothes, okay? Always." God, please let her be able to talk. I hold her away a foot and look into her eyes. "Heather, did your parents not let you wear panties sometimes?" She ducks her head and tries to squirm away. I let her go, and she stops just out of reach, confused. "Why don't we get some clean ones from the drawer," I say, "and I'll show you some neat gauchos we have."

I let her fish out some cottons with yellow flowers and then take her back to the closet. On the way I notice Janine is still twirling her leotards. Bethany has pulled out something frilly and orange. "Let's try another one," I say to her, and the first thing she shows me is a sailor-style dress in blue and white.

"That's pretty," I tell her. "You try it on.

She nods, lips pursed in contemplation of the dress, and I head to the closet where Raiven and Winnifred are fighting over a purple dress.

"It's mine. It's mine," Winni is screeching and pulling it from Raiven's hands.

"Fuck off, get away!" Raiven is pushing her.

"What's going on? Raiven, you know we don't talk that way."

"It's my dress!" says Winni. "I wore it last time."

"I found it first," says Raiven, with restrained pleading. "It's not hers. It belongs to the home."

"Well, Raiven's right about that. Is there another purple dress?" We hunt through plaids and polyester until we find one.

"Janine, I'm going to count to three, and if you don't get moving I'm going to dress you," I say. "One . . . Two . . . Three." I should have done this right away.

At the huge box of girls' dress-up shoes it's much the same. This shoe doesn't fit, nope, aha! this one does, but now where's the other one?

Finally it's back to the TV room to see if anybody needs help. Charys is doing Tanya's hair. Lenny, who's five, is pretending to hide under the table in full view.

"Need any help?" I ask Charys.

"I think she's the last one," she says, intent on finishing a braid. "Tanya decided to colour the Dreamspeakers poster with her toothpaste so she had to clean it up, right Tanya?"

Tanya nods. "Hold still, please," says Charys.

"Otherwise we're almost ready. Dennis is complaining because he has to wear pants that 'do up too tight.'" If Dennis had his way he would wear nothing but track pants, because with them he can reach in and fondle himself easily. He's eight.

Byron, Dennis' younger brother, comes up to me, his hair like a spray of peacock feathers at the back. "Wendy, I do my own hair. It's good, right?"

"Yes, Byron." I say. "Oh, but you missed a little spot there." And I get the spray water bottle from the high shelf and do it over for him.

"If Santa is there tonight will he still come for Christmas Eve?"

Finally, we are all ready for the bus—my girls look fine, Charys did a nice job getting Raiven's hair up (she's Cree, we're not allowed to cut it), Kath's four preschool boys, the preschool girls Ranjit took, and the older boys Alida took—and wow! it's even five minutes to six.

Kath sidles up to me on the way down to the coat-room. "You wouldn't believe what Christy did." Christy is two-and-a-half and very bright.

"What? Dennis, that door is off limits and you know it."

"Well, you know how she loves stickers, right? *'tickers* this, *'tickers* that. Give her a sticker for one day's good behaviour, and she'll be good for a week." I nod. Her under-bed drawer is full of them. The two of us are bringing up the rear behind Lee-Anne and Ryan who go down stairs backwards and slowly. "Well, I'm dressing Christy and Carol, and out of the blue Carol says to me, 'I'm pooping now. Kath, I'm pooping.' Gee, thanks for telling me." Kath grimaces, so I laugh. She goes on: "'Well, okay,' I say, 'let's get you to the toilet.' 'Done pooping now. All done.' And she was, too. So, alright, forget the toilet, I throw the change mat on the bed, pull on my glove, and she's just smiling up at me. When I finish I realize Christy's disappeared."

We're at the coat-room now, but she holds me back outside the door for a second. "Where do I find her? I hear her talking to herself in the washroom, and there she is, under the sink, amid a pile of sticker backings, with panty liners stuck all around, including one on each arm. *'tickers, Staff, lotsa 'tickers!*"

That's our Christy, alright!

When we finally have everybody with coats on it's after six, so we herd them outside. It's not too cold. I say, "Okay, now we're all going to sing a song to get the bus to come." I get "The Green Grass Grew All Around, All Around" going, but the kids are all distracted and restless. So I sing extra loud, so loud it sounds crazy and all the kids look at me. Tanya, who doesn't like me because I'm too firm, is even paying attention. She's four and her mother is a prostitute.

"Wendy," says Ranjit, "not so loud! You'll give us all a headache." But I sing even louder, and all the kids join me, even Tanya, wailing at the top of our lungs. At the end of the song, we all break into laughter. I play bad staff and let Ranjit order me on a time-out.

"Do you want to come to the dinner, Wendy?" she asks. I nod, wide-eyed. "Then you have to promise to be quiet on the bus and behave. You think about that while you're on time-out."

I pout with bottom lip, and the kids taunt me. "Wendy's on a time-out." "Wendy wa-as ba-ad." "Wendy sang too lou-oud." "Wendy has to be qui-et on the bu-us."

Ranjit waits, and then delivers the punchline: "Not just Wendy, but everyone has to be on their best behaviour tonight, okay?"

It half works—the kids still fight over where to sit, but some of them shush each other, and when we arrive at the church fifteen minutes later they are still doing it. I get out of the bus to reconnoitre. An older woman is waiting for us in the foyer.

"Hi, I'm Lina," she says. "You must be from Mary Immaculate."

"I'm Wendy," I say, and we shake hands. "Are you ready for me to bring the kids in?"

"You betcha," she says as though she herself were twelve. "Why don't you bring them into the foyer here, and I'll give them a little pep talk and then show you to your seats."

So I give the sign and everybody comes piling in. Two of the retired Sisters, Sister Rita and Sister Mary Jane, have come with us, thank goodness. Lina gets down on her haunches to address the kids. "Okay, boys and girls, I'm going to show you to your seats in a few minutes. But first let me tell you a few things—"

"Is Santa gonna be here? Is Santa gonna come? With presents?" Byron asks her.

"Do we get to sit on his lap?" asks Dennis slyly. He associates laps with sex, but there's nothing we can do about it. We hope he'll get counselling when he gets placed.

"Yes, he'll be here. Sviatya Mykolai, we call him. St. Nicholas. Now what was I going to tell you? Oh, I forget. Anyway, this is our annual church dinner, so there will be a lot of other people eating with you, okay?" She turns to me, then to one of the sisters. "Did they tell you it's a buffet? I hope that's alright."

"We'll manage," I say.

She leads us into the hall and points out our tables, along the back wall. It's an old building, and an old hall. The tables have white paper tablecloths. There's maybe a hundred people, a lot of them women the same age as Lina.

"If you need help with anything, let me know," she says.

"Can you tell us where the bathrooms are?" Ranjit asks.

"Right through there," she says.

Charys and I have one table, with Sister Mary Jane; Ranjit and Kath, the other with Sister Rita. Between us we separate all of the bad pairs.

"I get to sit with Wendy!" says Julia, who's four. Julia was first in our care several months ago, when her social worker paid mom a surprise visit late on a Saturday night and caught her high on drugs, totally out of it. Julia ended up with her grandmother, but in another surprise visit the social worker found grandma and her buddies toking up. So she's

back with us.

"I get to sit beside Wendy!" says Tanya, which is a surprise.

The chairs are too low for the young ones, so we push them in close and tell them they can sit on their knees.

"I want my juice in this glass, okay Wendy?" says Julia. For some reason there are wine glasses at our table settings.

"No," I say, "these glasses are here by mistake." I ask one of the servers bustling toward the kitchen to get the wine glasses and all the knives and coffee cups but three removed from each table, and after that we can breathe easier. Thankfully, there's not much else which is expensive or can be broken.

"How come there's so many forks, Wendy?"

"When's Santa coming, Wendy?"

Before we go for food, we explain the rules: first staff gets food for the little kids, big kids help themselves, and fours-to-eights come one at a time with us so we can scoop for them. I start with Ben, but when I get to the buffet my heart sinks: there are all kinds of Ukrainian dishes, the kids won't go near them. Thankfully, there are also beans, white bread, chicken, potatoes, and carrots. I thought there were supposed to be twelve dishes, for the twelve apostles, but it's more like twenty. Maybe it's pot luck.

Ben, pointing to the borscht: "What's that gross soup, Wendy?"

"You know what beets are?"

"Forget it!"

We pass four kinds of perogies ("Nope"), pickled herring ("Hey, Ben, where my parents come from people are crazy about these little fish!" "No way, Wendy! You're

crazy!"), sauerkraut (raised eyebrows), mushrooms ("Yuck!"), some other fish ("Uh-uh", shake of the head), three kinds of *holubtsi* cabbage rolls ("Nope"), rye bread ("No way").

He doesn't want any beans, but chicken and potatoes are okay. Tanya and Julia have the same tastes. I help each of them, one at a time, taking each of them to the food and back while Charys watches the table.

Lee-Anne, on the other hand, takes beans. As soon as she's back at the table, Ben pipes up. "Can I have some of those?" pointing at the beans.

"You already said you didn't want any."

"I want some. Please?"

"Okay, I'll get some." I know, I'm a sucker. "Does anybody else want beans?" No answer. Okay.

I come back. Julia: "Can I have some of those, too?" Aargh! You get the picture. I could stand some time on Santa's knee, too.

Byron, Dennis, and Raiven are already done eating. Dennis asks, "Wendy, can we go back for seconds?"

But Charys interjects: "Dennis, I told you you have to wait. Some of the other people haven't even had firsts yet."

The littlest ones are sitting on their knees. Sister Mary Jane is helping Ryan. Carol and John have potato and carrot all over their faces and hands.

Ben says, "Wendy, can we eat the chicken with our fingers?"

"Um, no, I think we should cut it up."

"Can you cut mine, then?"

"I'll get there in a minute, after I do Lee-Anne's."

A few seconds later, a plump, red-faced server passes by with an empty pot.

"Waiter, can you cut my meat for me?"

At one point Carol leans precariously to one side of her chair, but Charys sees it happening and breaks her fall. Charys is quick, dependable. When will she make a mistake? She hugs Carol to her chest. Carol is a cute, smiley kid who loves a good cuddle. Sometimes I get her in one-on-one time and we invariably do physical things like me giving her rides on my back or tickling. Mostly there isn't time for that.

"Toots," calls John to me (he calls all the staff 'toots'—he's three). "Toots, I have to go pee."

"My name's Wendy," I say, "just a minute. Are you alright on your own, Charys?"

She smiles. "Sure."

John is holding his crotch. "Wendy, I have to go bad! I have to go no-ow!" I take him by the hand. "Anybody else have to go?" No answer. Okay.

I come back, and sit John down. And myself. Maybe I can get some food now.

"Staff," whines Tanya to me. "Staff, I have to go pee-ee."

"You take her," I say to Charys, "okay?"

While I sit, catching my breath, I notice Byron and Dennis making fun of the people around them, gibberish in feigned high voices. They're actually very funny, but I can't let them offend our hosts.

When Charys comes back, I go for my own food, and decide to help John, because he has not eaten much yet and he's already lost interest. He slides forward off his chair. When I try to get him to sit, he arches his back, so I sit him on my lap and try to feed him from there, sneaking in a few long-distance bites for myself from my own plate.

"I don't like my 'tatoes," says Lee-Anne. "Do I hafta eat them?"

"How about just a few bites," I say.

"No! I don't want any more!" Lee-Anne's volume rises to a screech.

"Lee-Anne," I say firmly, "you're four, so you can eat four more bites." But it's already escalated into a temper tantrum, and I have to take her out and leave John. In the hallway, people pass and say, "Is everything all right? What a cute little girl."

After dessert (hot peach halves in bowls, spiced) there is entertainment at the other end of the hall. We bring the kids over to sit at the front on the floor. The first act is a juggler.

"San'a? San'a?" John asks.

"No, John, not yet."

The juggler juggles balls, sticks, lights the ends of the sticks and juggles them flaming.

"Fire, fire, fire," cries John, clapping.

"That's real fire, right Wendy?" asks Josh.

The juggler blows out one of the sticks and then trades it for a lit one, to blow it out in turn. But meanwhile, he has placed the extinguished one next to a lit one in his other hand, so that it catches fire again. He blows out three, four, five sticks, but keeps "accidentally" relighting them. The children laugh and shout, "Look, look!"

Finally, he figures out his error, blows them out, and moves on to a new trick. "I need a volunteer to help me," he says. "Can one of you help me?" Byron puts up his hand, jumps up and down, but when the magician leans over to take his hand and help him onstage, Byron yelps and jumps back and refuses. Jonathan goes up, helps, then runs and hides behind the table. Charys goes up in front of everyone and takes him down from the stage.

I notice Ryan stinks, so I take him out and change him.

I get back just in time to hear somebody start ringing a hand bell in the back, and everybody turns.

"Is it Santa? Santa's coming!" The kids are jumping up and down.

The door opens: it's Santa with an attendant dressed as an angel. But Santa's wearing yellow bishop's robes and a mitre and staff. Huh?

"That's not Santa." "Wendy, Wendy, that's not Santa." "Gimme a break, that's not Santa." "Aw. Can we go home?" "I knew Santa wouldn't come. It's not Christmas yet." Sometimes even we shepherds get surprised. If only they'd told us, we could have prepared the kids for this. Was the first Saint Nicholas what people expected?

The kids do get over their disappointment after a while, and when they see the angel starting to produce gift bags and pass them on to the Ukrainian St. Nicholas, they get in line pretty quick.

"What's your name?" St. Nicholas asks Byron, one of the first kids on his lap.

Byron looks around, confused. "I don't have to tell you my name," he wails. "Mummy said I don't hafta tell nobody!"

Some kids, after getting their bag, run around and join the line again.

The bags contain candies of all sorts, in foil and plastic wrappers, little chocolate bells in a box, a candy cane. Even though they've just eaten, the kids can't resist, and they act out their sugar high the whole ride home.

So now it's ten-thirty, and all of the little demons have been bathed and are asleep in bed with their innocent masks on. We've done the cleaning (I did a half-ass job in the

bathroom, but it'll be cleaned again tomorrow), and we're just resting and waiting for the night staff to come. I'm sitting in the dark in Cathy's office looking out over the station. The others are in the kitchen writing logs, but I came in here to phone for my ride. I like the peace and quiet, I like being able to review the day on my own for once (when I said I had a headache, superwoman Charys said she would do my part of the logs; I hope she wears herself down to our level soon, she makes us all look bad). I sit and listen to a train go by, but it's snowing and the usual racket is muffled and echoing funny so I cannot quite figure out whether it is coming or going.

## The Padded Red Seats

Elizabeth van Amerongen—thick brown hair bunned high on her head, oldest of nine, dedicated music major, business minor—would likely never have registered in my field of vision had it not been for her alto solo in Bach's *Magnificat*, the *Magnificat in D Major*. I'm sure I must have said hi to her a few times at practices, but always in the doorway or on the way to the water fountain, never in a moment where she would have had room to do anything more than echo my words back to me. But then, the week before the performance, she left her place among the other altos to stand at the front with Nancy Kuiper, the soprano, and two male soloists hired from outside.

It was my second year in the Sovereign College choir, a group of about thirty voices. Few of us save Elizabeth and Nancy were able to boast any actual voice training, at least as far as I knew, but most of us had found that two church services a Sunday since we were born, whether or not it got us into the heavenly choir, went a long way toward getting into an earthly one. Together the ensemble made a surprisingly good sound, or so people said. *Something* must have suggested to D. P.—as our director, Dirk Pieter Tigchelaar, was known to music students and choir members—that the *Magnificat* was within reach, though as performance week approached many of us were beginning to quail before the long melismas (especially in the "Gloria"), not to mention tenor lines in the falsetto range calling for double forte (oxymoronic, as far as I was concerned). From alto whispers to bass grumblings, revolt was in the air.

For the concert, the ever-resourceful D. P. had scraped together an ensemble of string players from the Edmonton Symphony willing to do non-union performances for a few extra bucks. Over the weekend I had been looking forward to seeing how D. P. would try to

manage the choleric among us in the presence of these invariably irritable players and their needy, Yorkshire-pudding egos. I had faith in D. P., even though the odds seemed against him, because the year before he had goaded us beyond our abilities in singing a series of Elizabethan motets. He was a sort of accomplished Falstaff who could bully or wheedle music from stones, and leave the stones looking back their entire lives on the miraculous accomplishment. He had a fine beer belly and carried it well. If not epitomizing the colourful stereotype associated with the province of his ancestors, Friesland, he was at least preventing it from dying out in the New World.

That Monday, the first full rehearsal including the soloists, we met in the auditorium instead of the practice room, the risers set up for the usual SATB arc between the golden-piped, woodworked façade of the organ and its master, D. P. (the organ was affectionately known as Dagon, and D. P. as Dagon's Priest). Waiting for the stragglers to arrive, we choristers stood in cliques drinking coffee or sharing performance fears with each other or watching the oboist, the last player to arrive, jitterishly unpack his instrument. The hired bass soloist, a stiff and tall type with a beard and brown corduroy sports jacket, conferred with D. P., while the tenor gazed animatedly around him, a thick, short, balding man in a bright smile and a black rayon shirt.

D. P. rapped on his music stand and called, "Attention, everyone, let's get started, *chacun à sa place*. We are going to leave the Purcell and the other material alone for today, and focus on the *Magnificat*." Elizabeth and Nancy stepped forward to their special chairs. While I knew nothing of Elizabeth, I had taken a French class with Nancy the previous year. She had blonde hair the length and style of Elizabeth's, if thinner. In both personality and schoolwork she exemplified competence: one part ability, one part dedication, one part dullness. I expected the same of her singing. She and Elizabeth were natural friends, to the

point that they were occasionally to be seen wearing each other's dresses.

Josy, in front of me, reading my thoughts, whispered over her shoulder, "How do you like that—two wholesome girls to represent us?" Josy was my latest romance, a drama major, an auburn-haired alto.

"It'll probably tickle people into putting extra into the *freewill* offering," I whispered back. The two of us revelled in the irony that our college, founded and supported by Dutch Calvinist churches, would be so free with the term "freewill," since we officially professed that the world, salvation in particular, ran according to predestination. We proposed to whomever would listen our suspicion that it was only the involvement of money which made the term a little less heretical. Nonetheless, at least the expression was better than calling it a "loooove offering" (we maliciously added a Southern drawl) as the Baptists and other evangelicals did when they sponsored Christian rock concerts on the premises.

Josy, née Josephine Renee De Weerd, was my Carmen, a woman of drama, beauty, and romance. She had cultivated an image tending towards what she called "Gothic", had her hair cut short with a wedge in the back, had removed the light bulbs from her dorm room and decorated it with tapestries and candles, using second-hand store menorahs for candelabras, went to all-black dance clubs downtown, smoked Players Light, and dedicated herself to evening-long practices for the upcoming spring play, in which she was to star as a female Dr. Faustus. In private it became evident that in many ways she remained a thoroughly practical, feet-on-the-ground bourgeois, but the nonchalance with which she had rewritten her public self had me in awe.

Only a few weeks previous we had begun to establish a regimen of surreptitious late night sherry (our campus was supposed to be "extra-dry") and Rachmaninoff recordings from the library. Outside her dorm our favourite pass-time was being publicly cynical together

about the college, and I remember bringing her a quote made by an early student rebel at Calvin College, our mother school in Michigan, who in the school newspaper in October 1930 labelled the college's board of trustees, "the 1930 vest-pocket edition of the Sanhedrin," and called their deliberations "stern circumnavigations around the perimeter of doughnuts." Josy laughed. "You'll be a prime candidate for that Sanhedrin in 30 years," she said softly, and bit gently on my earlobe. After a few loving bayonets like that it was only a matter of time before my eyes began to stray.

I'll admit my eyes strayed easily from girl to girl back then. I almost wrote "young woman," for so they were, marvellously, fully-fledged women, but I would have used "girl" at the time. Everybody I knew then did, they even called themselves that (there were but a handful of female instructors, mostly in art and French—and the only one I studied under would leave unhappily the next year). My passion was not for one girl in particular but for the female gender in general, in all its wondrous variety. I managed to fixate on one or two at a time as the locus of a particularly intriguing quality: academic brilliance in the humanities, in business, in the sciences (Carine, Laura, Retta, Kimberly, dedicated work-ethicists, all), types which I can blur together into a single ascetic face with an aquiline nose which I imagine framed against the white walls of the lab wing, or, in the case of the more health conscious (Trish, Nina . . . "eco-achievers", if I may), studying among the pines of the back forty; urbane and witty repartee, reclining on third-hand couches and armchairs (Heather, Grace, Katherine, each of us more interested in expressing ourselves as baroquely as possible than in dialoguing); earnest missionary talk at the kitchen table (Elaine, Bev, Crystal, there were many I tried to save); cherubic humour with flashing teeth on the stairs (ah, Sophia); full, curving breasts seen first on the badminton or volleyball court (Linda beneath a bob of brown hair, Esther under piled-high blonde curls, neither of whom shared or requited my

concupiscence). My interests changed every few months, sometimes out of self preservation, but mostly because my dedication to beauty would not be limited, was expanding with each new acquaintance. Josy had lasted longer than any other, as yet.

The first thing I noticed about Elizabeth after she opened her mouth to sing was just that: her mouth. To the alabaster skin of her face it seemed an impudent red betrayal, the lips lush and lavish against hard, white teeth, holding back a tongue that she bit when she was counting up to her entrances. Hers were the "love-freighted lips" of Rossetti's poetry. How could I have overlooked them for so long? How could it be that television and magazines, so obsessed with neo-Pre-Raphaelite lips of a fourteen-year-old "Face of the Eighties" from Scarborough named Monica Schnarre (bringing a fortune to any Hollywood doctor with experience in collagen enrichment), how could they have missed Elizabeth? Yet here she was, still available, though who knew what would happen after she left the Sovereign College cloister? She probably saw her entire mouth as an embarrassing curse, like red hair or overly-large breasts (of which she had neither), and had been hiding it on purpose. But she couldn't hide it when she sang. I imagined getting close to her and finding out that behind the self-protecting reserve she was a full-blooded woman. Or perhaps she had grown up unaware, perhaps she was a woman to be rescued like Rosina in *The Barber of Seville* from her benighted situation, to whose Titiana I could play Eugene Onegin. With a few lessons from me she would surely see the light and burn those lace collars and get out from under those braids and buns. Maybe I could get her to braid her hair wet and then let me carefully undo it and feel its ripples as she turned her head.

Elizabeth and Nancy may have been dowdy dressers, but after helping us struggle through a decidedly un-magnificent opening movement, they sang their solo parts with fervour, the stage lighting putting half-halos in their hair and defining their profiles sharply

against the black of the proscenium wall. Unlike the tenor soloist's inquisitive eyes, theirs veered neither to the right nor towards the chorus, even when we were singing (Elizabeth also bit her lower lip at times), and when we were silent they took over with what seemed to me a remarkably un-operatic passion.

All the rehearsals after that first one, that epiphanic moment, blur together. The bass turned out to be nothing short of majestic, especially in his "Quia fecit mihi magna" aria—put him in a robe and he would have been a great prophet, just perfect for Mendelssohn's *Elijah*. The tenor sang along with the choruses just for fun, ignoring the prophet's sour looks, and switched effortlessly between "Deposuit potentes," the triumphant aria about putting down the mighty and exalting the humble, and his later tender duet with Elizabeth, "Et misericordia," accompanied only by flutes and violins. As for D. P., during those seat-of-the-pants practices his eyes gleamed brighter, his jokes rankled worse, and he left his shirt untucked longer than ever before. He managed to defuse the resentment into a pleasurable shiver of conspiracy against Bach himself by telling fabricated anecdotes about the eminently respectable genius (such as what he *really* did in the three missing months after he walked all the way to Lübeck to hear Dietrich Buxtehude play).

But most of what I remember is Elizabeth with her score held high, her eyes looking right through D. P. to the padded red seats of the empty balcony. The tenor entrances had to be gone over many times, start, stop, start, stop, but she sang effortlessly, especially in the legatto lines of the "Suscepit Israel" trio. Those lucid moments still stand out from the blur of marathon rehearsals, late night reading on crime and social deviance and classes attended in body but not in spirit.

When the rehearsals go badly, the concert is usually a complete success, and this case was no exception. The soloists, concertmaster and conductor were all given roses—the college

administration ostentatiously proving that it could manage big-stage etiquette in our thousand-seat auditorium, despite the constituency's propensity to clap enthusiastically at any silence longer than a whole-note rest. Elizabeth looked, well . . . shocked at the extravagance, but in my opinion the red velvet petals belonged no where else but at her breast, near her lips, as in Rossetti's "Fair Rosamund". Her family swooped in afterwards—a distinguished, greying patriarch (Mr. van Amerongen was a businessman, an accountant if I remember correctly), a mother wearing her long, straight hair down (a privilege which came with greyness?), and a swarm of young siblings, at least ten—so I never got the chance to congratulate her. They were a conservative clan by all accounts: mother stayed at home, birth control dismissed as showing a lack of faith in providence, but enlightened at least in their attitude to music, with each child playing a symphonic instrument and the whole ensemble playing occasional pieces at church functions.

The next big thing after the *Magnificat* was to be our spring break choir tour through B. C. and Washington. D. P. had arranged billeting with the churches where we would be performing and promised "lots of homemade soup and buns." Great. That, together with the dictum that there would be no drinking throat-coating milk before the concert (which basically meant water, either chlorinated or from a sulphurous well), meant virtual prison food to Josy and I, gourmands both when we had the opportunity to cook, ascetics in the cafeteria, and who, if we had a choice, would drink only Evian water or some other European variety. We were still pretty intimate at the time, though we had suffered through a few fights about matters of taste: for example, whether or not jazz could be considered high culture (I said no; she, yes). We made up over that one while watching a Victor Borge video from the library (not exactly high culture, but hey, I'm not above strategic compromise).

I remember us sitting together on the bus, near the front, insulated by towering,

padded seats fore and aft, assigned by D. P. to keep a list of all the blunders and embarrassing incidents which took place for a mock awards ceremony he wanted to have. By the second day we had Tineke Aukema's slip-up of calling Telemann "Teleph-I-mean-Telemann" during her introduction of one of the pieces; a baton-throwing gaffe by D. P. himself; and Helen Kooy's back-of-the bus exclamation "He's got very fine legs!" uttered in a coincidentally silent moment. I was arguing to Josy that this last example wasn't up to the sort of cultivated standards which the Blunder Committee wanted to promote.

"It's merely the result of an accidental contextual overlap. If I stood up and shouted 'Hi-Q is game with very fine pegs' people would laugh just the same, but surely we cannot lower our standards to accept such an uncultivated response."

Something strange was building in her eyes. "You," she whispered to me, suddenly blustering, "you think you're so damned superior. Can't you see that's probably the closest thing to a sexual reference Helen's ever said in her whole life? Take a look beyond your own artificial world!"

"Me artificial! What about you, with all your arcane candles and. . . ." I hadn't meant to say that, and I quickly hissed, "I mean, is it my fault Helen is like that?"

But it was too late, her face coloured beautifully as though under light from a stained glass window, and she rejected me with hip and then hands and knees, literally dumping me out of the seat over the armrest and into the aisle. I bounced to my feet, performing a pratfall for the girls across the aisle and for anyone else who happened to see, ostentatiously dusted myself off and headed for the bathroom. I thought about sitting with Helen on the way back and asking what she thought of the blond hair on my limbs, but nixed that when I saw Elizabeth sitting with her. The seat across the aisle being available, I deposited myself and began to entertain them with the harrowing tale of my seventeenth-century ancestor, the

seaman/pirate Haarm Haarms who near the end of his life converted to the Christian faith.

The day the bus pulled into Abbotsford, we had an afternoon to kill and a bunch of us went walking around the church neighbourhood. Josy was there too, though we didn't walk exactly side by side. I was rather antic, balancing on curbs and posing with telephone poles and giving mock tours of the late capitalist bourgeois excesses, birdfeeders with squirrel protectors, etc., and Josy relented and laughed with the others.

The concerts were . . . well, what can I say? In all honesty, excellent. And what's more, well received, with standing ovations almost every time (though I should admit the ovations reflected at least in part people's emotional attachment to the college they and their parents had built). Our repertoire included a moving piece by Palestrina, sung *tout autour des auditeurs*, excerpts from the *Magnificat* including Elizabeth's graceful and dignified "Esurientes," and a Negro spiritual overflowing with honky emotion. We had a tape made of one of the performances. I still have it and pull it out once in while when I work past midnight and start feeling maudlin.

The next day, on a tour of Evangel Western University, we passed through a high-ceilinged chapel with excellent acoustics, and some eager beavers began *Dona nobis pachem* to hear the sound of their own voices. I was in the nave with Elizabeth. We shared a smile at their eagerness and paused together at the feeling of historical connection that accompanies singing in such a church.

"The life of a nun must have been so pure and simple. . . ." she began.

"You wouldn't be hearing those tenors singing, then," I warned. She laughed softly, like a pigeon or a dove, her face slightly flushed.

The last day of the tour, in Smithers, the awards ceremony was held. The theme was

"circus" with D. B. in his performance tails like a ringmaster. Telephone Tineke was decidedly too good-humoured about her humiliation, though D. P. registered a decent level of shock at finding himself on the list. Helen-of-the-Leg-Fetish came through with a magnificent incarnadine blush, upon which I congratulated myself for being so principally democratic in the award nomination process.

On the bus back to Edmonton, at night, Josy fell asleep at my side. The bus was quiet for the first time on the whole trip, except for some murmurs from the front where D. P. and his wife chatted with the usual obsequious music majors. A few reading lights shone narrow beams into individual seats, but the rest of the bus was in darkness. I went to the bathroom and noticed Elizabeth's was one of the illuminated, and that the seat next to her was empty (some of the students were coming back on their own from Smithers in order to make an extended visit with relatives). When I came back I plunked down with the temporary familiarity most of us had assumed after the first few days of touring. I was surprised to find her eyes red and her lips pale.

"Hey, Queen Elizabeth, what's up? Surely no more trouble with that Raleigh fellow?"

She blanched even more, her eyes jumping down at the opened letter on her lap, then she deliberately relaxed. "Not now, please. I'd like to be alone."

"Uh, sorry." Mentally scrambling, I managed to nod towards the front of the bus: "Row four, if I can do anything." She forced a smile. Josy, still half asleep, shifted to cuddle against my arm, but my thoughts were about Elizabeth.

I could come up with no explanation. Elizabeth was certainly not given to melodrama. Could it be boy trouble? I found that hard to swallow. Family problems? Josy awoke, so I told her and asked her opinion.

"What do her parents think about women in office?" she asked. A rather Zen-like

answer, but that was my Josy. She was referring to the polarization in our churches over whether to allow women pastors and elders. The all-male North American "Sanhedrin" was to deliberate and come to its decision when it met in a few weeks, the apparent climax of more than a decade of apparent climaxes and agitation on both sides. Conservatives of various stripes had seen this liberalization in the offing years before and had worked themselves up to the point of declaring to each other that the only alternative to the loss of "literal" Bible interpretation would be to leave the corrupted church and continue the old one. Through their newsletter, *Calvinist Renewal* (which Josy and I had parodied in a campus *samizdat* publication entitled *Glower and Be Cruel*), they had argued for exclusivist orthodox stands on the truth of a six day (144 hour) creation and on Bible passages such as 1 Timothy 2:12, where the Apostle Paul wrote, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man"—which they took as a model authority structure for family, church, and all society. Below the twin peaks of this iceberg were dozens of issues about the negative influences of contemporary culture and "lifestyles" (forgive me, a truly horrible word) and other Bible interpretations—but you get the picture. I had no idea about Elizabeth's parents, but perhaps the family were liberal enough, despite their piety, to be torn.

Later I went back again, ostensibly to the bathroom, and Elizabeth looked up as I passed and smiled briefly. On my return to my seat she put out a hand and invited me to sit. "I'm sorry about before, but you hit too close to home," she said, looking straight ahead. "Joshua van Egmond proposed to me last week, and I promised him an answer when we get back."

"Whoa!" I blurted in a controlled whisper, jumping as if hit, scrambling for a way to leave. Girls had done this to me before, and nothing repulsed me more than indecent self-exposure. It cut the heart right out of the casual intimacy I had enjoyed on the tour. "You

mean, the greenhouse Van Egmonds?"

She nodded. This was dark news indeed, and what's more it proved Josy's intuition true. Van Egmond's uncles, the Rev. Joachim Vriend and the Rev. Ronald Biggs, pastors in rural Ontario (Biggs was a convert from the now homosexual-friendly United Church), were regular rabid writers in *Calvinist Renewal*. On the level of intrachurch politics, this was the equivalent of Margaret Thatcher considering a proposal from an IRA bomber. I was biting my tongue—hard. What could Van Egmond promise but nine months of dependency-teaching morning sickness and decades of subservient married bliss and character-building, stay-at-home motherhood?

Finally I said (or, rather, blurted dangerously loudly), "What about your singing?"

"You are so naïve," she whispered. "I will never go anywhere with this mediocre voice, not even to graduate school."

"Elizabeth! Don't sell yourself short. I bet D. P. wouldn't say that." We were silent. She didn't answer. In my opinion, if she married him she would never go anywhere, but could I say that? I said, "Do you love him?"

She snorted and looked scornfully at me. "What kind of question is that? Grow up, man. Love isn't something you . . . you fall into. If you think of it that way, you can just as soon fall out of it—you'll become a divorce statistic. What kind of Christian witness is that?"

"Well . . . well. . . ." Addled, to say the least, I latched onto a biblical refutation: "What about Jacob falling in love with Rachel?"

She thought, biting her bottom lip. "Okay, of course it's possible. But realistically, how many people do you think have that happen to them? I know people who have waited around their whole life hoping someday to fall in love with someone. . . ."

"So you have to pretend love when there is the opportunity and the real thing will

eventually develop," I finished for her.

"Maybe," she said.

"What kind of Christian witness is that? God helps those who help themselves?"

Colour was coming to her cheeks now. "Don't you accuse me of not trusting providence! I've been praying for what to do since I got the stupid letter." She turned away to the window, tears in her eyes.

I sat stonily, hoping no one had heard. The two girls across the aisle were sleeping, one leaning on the other the way Josy had been leaning against me. It was dark, and I could see warehouses and factories behind Elizabeth's head, neon logos flashing by. The outskirts of Edmonton.

Suddenly she said in a bitter whisper, "I've been praying for a sign. Maybe you're that sign after all."

"Geez, woman, I'm no sign!"

That was it (the word of course too close to "Jesus"), and I was out in the aisle again.

Since then I've been out of school for four years, loosened up a bit, tried to shuck the Eugene Onegin role. I got lucky and found a job right away with the *Vancouver Province*, writing and putting together a family page once a week. There at least I can blame unrealistic deadlines for the lack of polish in my work, and the editors' fixation on our target audience for its lowbrow vocabulary and tone. I've been working on a book of poetry in my "spare time" (forgive the expression), kind of a cross between late Auden, Christopher Smart, and Edward Taylor, with a bit of Tish and early Ondaatje (*The Man with Seven Toes*, etc.) thrown in to shake things up.

Josy and I broke up the year before graduation. I sometimes miss her, though I don't

know that I could ever have stayed married to a woman who thought Tolkien and Laurie Anderson were great artists. She was doing some kind of Christian feminist performance art at the Banff Centre, last I heard. I almost made the trip east once to sit in on a show in disguise, but I felt for sure she would recognize me in the small hall and that it could throw her off-balance for the rest of the show.

I have not heard of Elizabeth since grad, not even whether or not she'd married. In fact, I have not heard much about any of my old schoolmates or their families since I moved to Vancouver and began attending an Anglican church (great liturgy, but pathetic preaching, and don't ask about the congregational singing; I try to make up for both on the side, but it keeps me busy). Our church's "Sanhedrin" had flip-flopped three times in the past years over the opening of clergy positions to women, and when I read in the church magazine that the matter was being sent to another study committee, I jumped ship.

So imagine my surprise when I received an invitation to join the inaugural edition of the Sovereign College alumni choir, a group which was to meet for several weekend rehearsals and then present concerts for the faithful in Edmonton and Calgary. Though momentarily intrigued in a morbid way—I wanted to see if D. P. had gained weight and if he was still the character I remembered, if anyone I knew from the old days would have heard of my articles, who would be so pathetically nostalgic to show up, the usual reunion-type curiosities—I threw the response card in the garbage.

Then of all things Jerry, my editor, wanted to send me to do some research and interviews in Edmonton the same weekend as the first rehearsal.

"What is this, a sign from above?" I said to him.

"What?"

"Nothing." I counted to seven, and nothing changed, so I asked him: "What if I said

I wanted to extend the trip for a week?"

He agreed, so I ended up phoning D. P. to mail me the music.

I arrived late that first rehearsal to avoid any maudlin chit-chat. D. P. was already leading warm-ups as I gathered my music from a table by the door: a negro spiritual and some Bach I knew, a Tallis and a Brahms (sumptuous, both), a Grotenhuis anthem I detested, a Genevan hymn arrangement by Kodaly, and a Randall Thompson for the men. I received my tardiness tongue lashing in silence, and the practice went well. Elizabeth was not in attendance.

During coffee break I asked around and found that she had indeed married her Joshua, though no one seemed to know much of the wedding. Her family, I was surprised to hear, had so far found it in themselves to stay—with reservations—in the "increasingly liberal" church, but soon after the wedding Elizabeth had left it with her new husband—already pregnant.

I also heard that, two years ago, one of her younger brothers followed her into the ranks of matrimony, though not out of the church. He married a college classmate of the liberal persuasion. Elizabeth and Joshua and Joshua Jr. sent as a gift a handsome collection of Calvin's Bible commentaries but declined to attend the ceremony or the reception, since both were held in a church which had hopelessly compromised itself, just like the church back in the Netherlands which now permits homosexual pastors, euthanasia, and the like (insert proof texts and courteous invective here as necessary).

Six days later, dress rehearsal night in Edmonton, D. P. had the entire choir over to his house for dinner. Over bean salad and Heineken he told me that Elizabeth was on her third child now and liked being a full-time mother. He had run into Van Egmond when he

played a concert at an independent church a few months ago. "He wouldn't talk about the Van Amerongens. He tried to prove to me that the church was unbiblical, but before we got into a hopeless argument he did say that she's really happy, and wishes that she'd got married right away instead of taking her father's advice and going to 'that liberal college.'"

"That makes me sick. She's denying the four best years of her life."

D.P. raised his decidedly unkempt eyebrows. "Not everyone is in a position to pursue the dreams we want to endow them with. She never swallowed all this 'you can be whatever you want to be' rhetoric."

"Oh," I said.

The concert should have held little in the way of *angst* for me, given the pieces we were singing. Yet I was afraid.

Standing shoulder to shoulder among the other tenors in the college's polyester tuxedos, looking over the audience, I spotted Elizabeth with her mother, off to the side near the front. My fear congealed. Weren't they supposedly estranged? Where were her kids? She was smiling, I could tell in profile, but I couldn't see how long her hair was. I looked away hoping she wouldn't see me looking. She would know I was here, my name was printed in the program. I felt weak. Was it her I was afraid of? What the hell was this? Elizabeth was here—everything I had rejected, the lowest common denominator of the church community I had spurned—and I was afraid . . . I was afraid she would say that she was enjoying her life. I wanted her to be trapped in an unhappy marriage, her intellect little used and unappreciated, sickly, chafing at her limitations, at being kept a dabbler.

I knew I would talk to them in the intermission, though choir members were supposed to stay incommunicado. It would require a fast change out of and back into my robe.

"Hello, Elizabeth."

"Well, hello."

"How are you doing?"

"Fine. The kids keep me really busy. They're so precious."

"How about Joshua?"

"Joshua Sr. is doing very well. He just put in a new irrigation system. Joshua is also the name we have chosen for one of our children."

Do you love him? Do you love him? Does he love you? "This must be your mother, I remember you from the year when Elizabeth sang in the *Magnificat*."

She blushes, smiles. "Elizabeth has always had a wonderful voice."

"Do you get a chance to sing much, these days?"

"Not like that. I sing to the children and I sing in church. It's enough." She pauses.

Her mother goes for a coffee and I steer Elizabeth outside.

"It's nice to get out to a concert like this with my mom. This is the first time we've been out to one since I got married." A pause, and she turns to me. I bite my lip.

"You know Joshua and I have left the denomination to remain orthodox?"

"Um, yes. D. P. was saying something to me."

"You think I'm a fool, don't you?"

"What?"

"To have done this. Made these choices."

"They are your choices. I should be able to respect them."

"But you don't. Do you."

"I can't understand it! I don't understand compromise. How do you do it? How do

you live with it without being unhappy?"

"I chose to commit myself to the community I married into, which required some concessions. I know they seem oppressive to you . . . But some things are more important than personal freedom, justice, rights. . . ."

"Such as?"

"Love. Commitment."

"Dear God."

"Please don't talk that way or I'll leave right now."

"Sorry I offended you."

"See, right there. I showed you I will stand up for certain principles."

"Yes."

"You value your principles more than community."

"There are other communities."

"Not for Joshua and his family. What community have you found?"

"I guess I'm still searching. But I am happy that I can be honest with myself and not hypocritical." And I can split myself among several large communities, instead of a single enfortressed one.

"But you're lonely, aren't you?"

I glance toward the door.

"Real happiness comes only when you stop wanting so badly."

Where is all this coming from? Who asked her to lead the conversation? "I've heard that before. Contentment is not wanting. But it sounds so unfulfilling. Surely life is meant to be more than that. . . ." And then finally, hastily: "Do you love each other?"

"Yes." Her eyes are firm.

Sometimes, I still let myself wonder. I have yet to meet another woman who can intrigue me like that, whom I respond to at such a level. I wonder if she could ever have compromised in the other direction, and come to be with me. God knows. Sometimes I think he must be up there in the balcony seats, laughing.

Boyce, Pleuke. *Dutch Medley: Poems and Stories*. Ill. Colleen M. Graham. Windsor, Ont.: Netherlandic, 1986.

Brashler, William. *The Bingo Long Travelling All-Stars and Motor Kings*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973.

———. *City Dogs: A Novel*. New York: Harper & Row, 1976.

———. *The Chosen Prey*. New York: Harper & Row, 1982.

———. *Traders*. New York: Macmillan, 1989 and Harper & Row, 1990.[1]

Buning, Sietze [pseudonym of Stanley Wiersma]. *Purpaleanie and Other Permutations*. Orange City, Iowa: Middleburg, 1978.

———. *Style and Class*. Orange City, Iowa: Middleburg, 1982.

Cook, Hugh. *Cracked Wheat and Other Stories*. Oakville, Ont., New York and London: Mosaic, 1985.

———. *The Homecoming Man*. Oakville, Ont., New York and London: Mosaic, 1989.

De Jong, David Cornel.[2] *Belly Fulla Straw*. New York: Knopf, 1934.

———. *Old Haven*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1938. London: Heineman, 1939.

———. *Light Sons and Dark*. New York and London: Harper & Brother, 1940.

———. *Day of the Trumpet*. New York and London: Harper & Brother, 1941.

———. *Benefit Street*. New York and London: Harper and Brother, 1942

———. *Across the Board: Poems*. New York and London: Harper and Brother, 1943.

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[1] I am told that Brashler has co-authored a number of suspense novels with Reinder Van Till, but I can find no record of such works. I have also been told that *Bingo* was made into a "Hollywood movie" starring James Earl Jones, but again, I can find no record.

[2] D. C. De Jong also published a dozen children's books in the early 1960s (which I have excluded from this bibliography).

———. *With a Dutch Accent: How a Hollander Became an American*. New York and London: Harper and Brother, 1944. London: Gollancz, 1944.

———. *Domination of June* [*Poems*]. West Los Angeles: Wagon and Star, 1944.

———. *Somewhat Angels*. New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1945.

———. *Snow-on-the-Mountain and Other Stories*. New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1946.

———. *The Desperate Children*. Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1949.

———. *Two Sofas in the Parlor*. Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1952.

———. *The Unfairness of Easter, and Other Stories*. Ill. Newton Baird. San Jose: Talisman, 1959.

De Jong, Meindert. *The Big Goose and the Little White Duck*. Ill. Edna Porter. New York and London: Harper & Brother, 1938.[3]

De Vries, Peter. *But Who Wakes the Bugler?* Ill. Charles Addams. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1940.

———. *The Handsome Heart*. New York: Coward-McGann, 1943.

———. *Angels Can't do Better*. New York: Coward-McGann; Toronto: Longmans, Green, 1944.

———. *No, But I Saw the Movie*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1952.[4]

———. *The Tunnel of Love*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1954.

———. *Comfort Me with Apples*. Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, 1956.

——— and Joseph Fields. *The Tunnel of Love, A Play: Based upon the Novel by Peter De*

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[3] Meindert De Jong was a prolific author of award-winning children's literature. His most popular works include: *Dirk's Dog, Bello* (1939), *Smoke above the Lane* (1951), *Hurry Home, Candy* (1953), *The Wheel on the School* (1954), *The House of Sixty Fathers* (1956), *Along Came a Dog* (1958), *Far Out the Long Canal* (1964), and *Journey from Peppermint Street* (1968). There are dozens of others. De Jong was the brother of David Cornel (see above).

[4] Most De Vries novels are published a year or two after release by Victor Gollancz and Panther Books in London, Penguin Books in Harmondsworth, and both the New American Library (Signet) and the Popular Library in New York.

*Vries*. Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, 1957.[5]

———. *The Mackerel Plaza*. Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, 1958.

———. *The Tents of Wickedness*. Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, 1959.

———. *Through the Fields of Clover*. Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, 1961.

———. *The Blood of the Lamb*. Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, 1962.[6]

———. *Reuben, Reuben*. Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, 1964.[7]

———. *Let Me Count the Ways*. Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, 1965.

———. *The Vale of Laughter*. Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, 1967.

———. *The Cat's Pajamas & Witch's Milk: Two Novels*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1968.

———. *Mrs. Wallop*. Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, 1970.

———. *Into Your Tent I'll Creep*. Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, 1971.

———. *Without a Stitch in Time: A Selection of the Best Humorous Short Pieces*. Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, 1972.

———. *Forever Panting*. Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, 1973.

———. *The Glory of the Hummingbird: A Novel*. Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, 1974.

———. *I Hear America Swinging*. Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, 1976.

———. *Madder Music*. Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, 1977.

———. *Consenting Adults; or, The Duchess Will Be Furious: A Novel*. Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, 1980.

———. *Sauce for the Goose*. Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, 1981.

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[5] The play was subsequently revised by the same authors (most changes occur in the stage directions) and republished as *The Tunnel of Love: A Comedy in Three Acts* (New York: Samuel French, 1958).

[6] Perhaps De Vries' most well-known work, offered in various languages in *Reader's Digest Condensed Books*, 1962, and in braille (Louisville, Kent.: American Printing House for the Blind, 1963).

[7] Also (New York: Bantam Books, 1965). Also made into a play (without De Vries' participation) by Herman Shumlin, *Spofford: A Comedy in Two Acts. Based on the Novel* Reuben, Reuben *by Peter De Vries* (New York: Samuel French, 1967).

———. *Slouching towards Kalamazoo*. Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, 1983.

———. *The Prick of Noon*. Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, 1985.

———. *Peckham's Marbles*. New York: Putnam, 1986.

Farenhorst, Christine. *Suffer Annie Spence: A Collection of Verily Tales Told Once Upon Time*. Ill. Charity Farenhorst. Owen Sound: Covenant Publishing (Canada), 1994.

Gosselink, Sara Elizabeth. *When Their Missionary Came*. Franklin, Ohio and Denver, Col.: Eldridge Entertainment House, 1923.[8]

———. *Roofs over Strawtown* [A Novel]. Ill. Reynold H. Weidenaar. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1945.

Heynen, James (Jim). *Maedra Poems*. Rock Hill, S. C.: Peaceweed, 1974.

———. *Sioux Songs*. [N.P.: N.P.], 1975.

———. *Notes from Custer*. Ann Arbor, Mich.: Bear Claw, 1976.

———. *The Funeral Parlor*. Port Townsend, Wa.: Graywolf, 1976.

———. *How the Sow Became a Goddess*. Lewiston, Idaho: Confluence, 1977.

———. *The Man Who Kept Cigars in His Cap*. Ill. Tom Pohrt. Port Townsend, Wa.: Graywolf, 1979.

———. *A Suitable Church: Poems*. Port Townsend, Wa.: Copper Canyon, 1981.

———. *You Know What is Right: Stories*. San Francisco: North Point, 1985.

———. *The One-Room Schoolhouse: Stories about the Boys*. New York: Knopf; Toronto: Random House, 1993.

Houtman, Harry, ed. *Six Days: An Anthology of Canadian Christian Poetry*. Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1971.[9]

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[8] Gosselink wrote about two-dozen other "sacred dramas" and biblical adaptations for children, published before 1935.

[9] Contains poetry by Margaret Avison, Hugh Cook, Heather Marsman, Nick Ringma, Jeff Seffinga, Kathleen Speyers, Frederick Tammings and David Toems, most of whom are Dutch Calvinists.

Jager, Ronald. *Eighty Acres*. Boston: Beacon, 1992.

———. *Last House on the Road*. Boston: Beacon, 1994.

Jellema, Roderick. *Something Tugging at the Line*. Washington, D. C.: Dryad, 1974.

———. *The Lost Faces: Poems*. Washington, D. C.: Dryad, 1979.

———. *The Eighth Day: New and Selected Poems*. Washington, D. C.: Dryad, 1984.

Kruithof, Bastian. *Instead of the Thorn*. New York: Half Moon, 1941.

Manfred, Frederick Feikema. *The Golden Bowl: A Novel*. St. Paul: Webb Publishing Company, 1944.[10]

———. *Boy Almighty: A Novel*. St. Paul: Itasca, 1945.

———. *This is the Year*. Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1947.

———. *The Chokecherry Tree*. Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1948.

———. *The Primitive*. Book one of the World's Wanderer trilogy. Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1949.

———. *The Brother*. Book two of the World's Wanderer trilogy. Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1950.

———. *The Giant*. Book three of the World's Wanderer trilogy. Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1951.

———. *Lord Grizzly*. New York: Random House and McGraw-Hill, 1954.[11]

———. *Morning Red: A Romance*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1956.

———. *Riders of Judgement*. New York: Random House; Toronto: McLeod, 1957.

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[10] Republished in a "Twenty-fifth anniversary edition" with an added introduction by John R. Milton (Vermillion, S. Dak.: Dakota, 1969) and again, with an introduction by Delbert E. Wylder (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico P, 1976). A number of Manfred's other novels were also re-issued in the late 1970s and early 1980s by university presses, but for simplicity's sake I have left out exact references here. Previous to 1954, Manfred went by and published under his birthname, Feike Feikema.

[11] Later editions (New York: Pocket Books, 1955), (New York: Signet-New American Library, 1964) and (London: Transworld, 1957). This book increased Manfred's reputation so that most of his next eleven books were also immediately picked up by Pocket and Signet.

———. *Conquering Horse: A Novel*. New York: McDowell, Oblonsky, 1959.

———. *Arrow of Love*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1961.

———. *Wanderlust, a Trilogy: The Primitive. The Brother. The Giant*. Denver: Alan Swallow, 1962 [omnibus republication].

———. *Scarlet Plume*. New York: Trident, 1964.

———. *The Man Who Looked Like the Prince of Wales*. New York: Trident, 1965.[12]

———. *King of Spades*. New York: Trident, 1965.

———. *Winter Count: Poems, 1934-1965*. Minneapolis: J. D. Thueson, 1966.

———. *Apples of Paradise and Other Stories*. New York: Trident, 1967.

———. *Eden Prairie*. New York: Trident, 1968.

———. *The Manly-Hearted Woman*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1975.

———. *Milk of Wolves*. Boston: Avenue Victor Hugo, 1976.

———. *Green Earth: A Novel*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1977.

———. *The Wind Blows Free: A Reminiscence*. Ill. Elsie Thorson. Sioux Falls, S. Dak.: Center for Western Studies at Augustana College, 1979.

———. *Sons of Adam: A Novel*. New York: Crown, 1980.

———. *Flowers of Desire: A Novel*. Salt Lake City: Dancing Badger 1989.

———. *No Fun on Sunday: A Novel*. Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1990.

———. *Of Lizards and Angels: A Saga of Siouxland*. Norman: University of Oklahoma P, 1992.

———. *Duke's Mixture*. Sioux Falls, S. Dak.: Center for Western Studies at Augustana College, 1994.

Meeter, Glenn. *Letters to Barbara*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982.

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[12] Republished as *The Secret Place* (New York: Pocket Books, 1967).

Mulder, Arnold. *The Dominie of Harlem*. Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1913.

———. *Bram of the Five Corners*. Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1915.

———. *The Outbound Road*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1919.

———. *The Sand Doctor*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1921.

———. *Americans from Holland*. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1947.

Post, Marie J. *I Had Never Visited an Artist Before, and Other Poems*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Being Publications, 1973.

———. *Sandals, Sails, & Saints*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: CRC Publications, 1993.

Schaap, James Calvin. *Sign of a Promise and Other Stories*. Sioux Center, Iowa: Dordt College P, 1979.

———. *Thirty-five and Counting*. Ill. Norman Matheis. Sioux Center, Iowa: Dordt College P, 1985.

———. *Home Free*. Westchester, Ill.: Crossway Books-Good News Publishers, 1986.

———. *The Privacy of Storm*. Sioux Center, Iowa: Dordt College P, 1990.

——— and Diet Eman. *Things We Couldn't Say* [A Memoir]. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994.

———. *Still Life*. Sioux Center, Iowa: Dordt College P, 1994.

———. *In the Silence There Are Ghosts*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Book House, 1995.

Seffinga, Jeff. *Three Crows Flying*. Hamilton: Seagull Publications, 1981.

Siebenga, Linda. *Windcatcher*. Burlington, Ont.: Welch Publishing, 1989.

Tamminga, Frederick W. *Believe It Or . . .* [N.P.: N.P., 1971?].[13]

———. *The Great Hallel*. [N.P.: N.P., 1972?].

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[13] These first two books are listed as previous publications on the dust jacket of *Bunk among Dragons*, but I can find no other record of them.

———. *Bunk among Dragons: Poems and Translanguistic Adaptations.* Ill. Matthew Cupido. Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1973.

———. *Prescription Z.* Richmond Hill, Ont.: Scholastic-Tab, 1974.

Terpstra, John. *Scrabbling for Repose.* Toronto: Split Reed, 1982.

———. *Forty Days and Forty Nights.* Windsor, Ont.: Netherlandic, 1987.

———. *Naked Trees.* Windsor, Ont.: Netherlandic, 1990.

———. *Captain Kintail.* Windsor, Ont.: Netherlandic, 1992.

Timmerman, John H. *The Forgotten Wise Man.* Book one of The Jerusalem Journeys. Urbana, Ill.: Intervarsity, 1993.

———. *Valley of the Shadow.* Book two of The Jerusalem Journeys. Urbana, Ill.: Intervarsity, 1994.

———. *Under the Knife.* Book three of The Jerusalem Journeys. Urbana, Ill.: Intervarsity, 1995.

Vanden Berg, Frank. *Westhaven.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1943.

Van Herk, Aritha.[14] *Judith.* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart; Boston: Little, Brown; London: A. Deutsch, 1978.

———. *The Tent Peg: A Novel.* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1981.

———. *No Fixed Address: An Amorous Journey.* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986.

———. *Places Far from Ellesmere: Explorations on Site: A Geograficione.* Red Deer, Alta.: Red Deer College, 1990.

[14] While Aritha Van Herk has obviously been influenced by her Dutch-Christian heritage, I do not know how familiar she is with Calvinism.

*Appendix: Reading List and Influences*

As the preceding bibliography suggests, a number of the works that have influenced the writing of these stories are by people who share my ethno-religious heritage, people who have written of their struggles to come to terms with Dutch Calvinist culture and its shaping forces on hundreds of thousands of people across North America. Professional writers and artists who have emerged from this background tend to be harshly critical of their heritage, often to the point of rejecting it and their co-inheritors—an antagonism which bespeaks the orthodoxy of most Dutch Calvinist social networks and which fits with the historically common dynamic of artist as social rebel.[15]

The term Calvinist deserves some explanation, for at first hearing it may sound anachronistic. In fact a number of church denominations still profess to hold to Reformation-era theology and thought (*e.g.,* of John Calvin or Martin Luther and their immediate successors). These churches include not only Dutch-American churches such as the Christian Reformed Church in North America and the Reformed Church in America and their splinter groups, but also groups originating from other ethnic backgrounds, such as the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

Such groups prove their orthodoxy by official espousal of various creeds or statements of faith dating from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[16] In the denominations with Dutch roots, these creedal statements include the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession,

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[15] To note that Calvinism is not amenable to art has become a North American cliché. James Bowden, for example, assumes his readers are familiar with the idea that Calvinism is "deadly toward art": James Henry Bowden, *Peter De Vries* (Boston: Twayne, 1983) 23, 167. A timely example of an artist who deals with her rejection of her Calvinist heritage in her work is filmmaker Patricia Rozema, whose latest film *When Night is Falling* (released summer 1995) depicts a homosexual love affair between a Christian university professor and a woman of the circus.

[16] Such documents were originally forged (or at least approved) by international Calvinist synods. For an excellent historical introduction to the roots of various "Calvinisms", see Menna Prestwich, ed., *International Calvinism 1541-1715* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1985).

and the Canons of Dort. These documents say that all humans begin life unable to do anything good in the eyes of God, that God graciously chooses some for salvation (not on the basis of their own merits, for they have none) and that these chosen, the "elect," can neither resist God's grace nor lose their "election" in experiences of temptation and trial.

Most mainline Protestant denominations have compromised these Reformation-era doctrines by officially or practically ameliorating such a severe view of God (by emphasizing God's compassionate nature) and pessimistic view of humanity (by suggesting that man is more misguided than willfully disobedient, or perhaps even inherently good). Fundamentalist denominations also argue that man is not so depraved that his ability to choose is affected, that "backsliding" is a continual danger, and that God's call to salvation is to all and not just "the elect."[17]

Dutch Calvinist immigrants, like the Puritans before them, came to North America for reasons of economic hardship, ecclesiastical differences, and perceived moral and spiritual corruption in their homeland. Dutch immigrants in the mid-nineteenth century settled predominately in the Great Lakes region, in the American midwest, and in Alberta, many taking up farming.[18] Society back in the Netherlands was changing rapidly, and each wave of immigration was marked decisively by different amounts of pietism (*i.e.*, personal devotion often coupled with reluctance either to cultural activism or to evangelism). Each later wave had more experience of the development of institutional pluralism in the Netherlands which resulted from the religious-political theories of so-called Neo-Calvinists such as Abraham

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[17] For a more complete discussion see David F. Wells, ed., *Reformed Theology in America: A History of Its Modern Development* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1985).

[18] See Gerald F. De Jong, *The Dutch in America*, 1609-1974 (Boston: Twayne, 1975), Robert P. Swierenga, ed., *They Came to Stay: Dutch Immigration to North America, 1782-1982* (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers UP, 1984), and Herman Ganzevoort, *A Bittersweet Land: The Dutch Canadian Experience in Canada, 1890-1980* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988).

Kuyper (1837-1920). Neo-Calvinist thought, which encouraged the formation of separate school systems, political parties, labour unions, and other institutions for each of the country's religious groups, reached its greatest influence at the turn of the twentieth century when Kuyper rose to become Dutch prime minister (1901-1905).[19]

The various Dutch Calvinist immigrant groups in America held allegiance to their different respective heritages remarkably well. (The majority in Canada came during the 1950s.) James Bratt categorizes four main groups[20] and uses this categorization to explain the various positions taken on internal and national disputes. Disputes there were aplenty, particularly on theological issues such as liberalism and so-called "common grace" (*i.e.*, the notion of non-Christians doing good), and on political and lifestyle issues, especially questions of sexuality, women's suffrage, theatre and movie attendance, alcohol use, games of chance, organized labour, North American involvement in the two world wars, etc. Official church declarations often adopted the most conservative position in each debate. Indeed, one may say that Dutch Calvinism in North America is characterized by resistance to Americanization and modernization.[21] Nonetheless, as the contemporary examples of televangelist Robert Schuller and of the Amway Corporation (both with typically American gospels of success) show, such conservatism was neither entirely successful nor embraced by every segment of the community.

Dutch Calvinist institution building has been instrumental in preserving a unique

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[19] One Dutch Calvinist historian compares Kuyper to the better known English figures John Henry Newman and William Gladstone: see James D. Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America: A History of a Conservative Subculture* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1984) 230. See note 20, below.

[20] Bratt, 47. I am greatly indebted to Bratt's work for much of this appendix, and it served as an excellent starting point for my bibliographical research, since it also addresses four of the tradition's "renegade" novelists: Mulder, De Vries, Manfred and D. C. De Jong (Bratt, 159-183).

[21] See Michael Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics: Politics and Culture in the Seventies* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), Leonard Dinnerstein and David Reimers, *Ethnic Americans: A History of Immigration and Assimilation* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), and Randal M. Miller and Thomas D. Marzik, eds. *Immigration and Religion in Urban America* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1977).

identity in America. A comparison could be made with the resistance and self sufficiency of the various Mennonite communities such as those around Winnipeg. On the educational scene, Dutch Calvinists founded independent Christian elementary and high schools as well as liberal arts universities such as Calvin College and Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan.[22] For a time, one segment of the Dutch Calvinist community's intellectuals traditionally did overseas graduate study at the Free University in Amsterdam, a school that has helped shape the ideas of many of the professors who work at the community's colleges and also a number of academics who have gone on to public institutions, the latter including theologians and philosophers such as Lewis Smedes, Howard Hageman, H. Evan Runner and Nicholas Wolterstorff. An earlier graduate tradition involved Princeton Theological Seminary, and most recently a Calvinist-based graduate school in Toronto, the Institute for Christian Studies, has graduated a number of accomplished thinkers in aesthetics and philosophy.

Dutch Calvinist publications boast a long tradition of perceptive analysis of the religious and philosophical assumptions behind social trends and political positions, though also one of infighting and intolerance. Contemporary periodicals, including *The Banner*, *The Christian Courier*, *Christian Renewal*, *The Church Herald*, *Perspectives: A Journal of Reformed Thought* and *The Reformed Review* continue to exhibit these characteristics.[23] The three major publishing houses to arise from the community are all based in Grand Rapids,

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[22] Other smaller and younger institutions include The King's College in Edmonton, Alberta; Redeemer College in Ancaster, Ontario; Dordt College in Sioux Center, Iowa; Hope College and Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan; and Trinity College in Palos Heights, Illinois.

[23] Most of the American publications date back to the turn of the century under various other incarnations. Present bibliographic information concerning active periodicals is as follows: *The Banner*, official weekly publication of the Christian Reformed Church (Grand Rapids, Mich.: CRC Publications, 1904-present); *The Christian Courier: A Reformed Weekly* (St. Catharines, Ont.: Calvinist Contact, 1945-present); *Christian Renewal* (Jordan Station, Ont.: The Abraham Kuyper Foundation, 1982-present); *The Church Herald*, official monthly publication of the Reformed Church in America (Holland, Mich.: Church Herald, 1944-present); *Perspectives: A Journal of Reformed Thought: Incorporating* <u>*The Reformed Journal*</u> (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Reformed Church P, 1991-present); and *The Reformed Review* (Holland, Mich.: Western Theological Seminary P, 1955-present).

Michigan, and are known especially for educational, theological, and philosophical publications. They are Wm. B. Eerdmans and Co., dating from before World War I, Zondervan (1932) and Baker Book House (1939).[24] Some Canadian books cited in my bibliography were also published by the now defunct Wedge Publishing Foundation of Toronto, which had ties to the Institute for Christian Studies. A publisher that seems to be taking up some of the slack in Canada is Netherlandic Press of Windsor, Ontario—a press that is markedly less interested in the religious aspects of the communities' identities, but which nevertheless has published a number of anthologies including stories and poems by Dutch Calvinist authors.

Dutch Calvinist literary writers, like Jewish ones, are almost all born into the tradition—there are few, if any, converts. Generally, they do not see themselves as writers in isolation, but in relation to the vast amount of other literary writing influenced by various Christian traditions,[25] some of it marked by European ethnicity (*e.g.*, writing by Norwegian Lutherans, Canadian Mennonites, the "Pennsylvania Dutch", Italian Roman Catholics, etc.), some of it more American (*e.g.*, writing by members of Fundamentalist, Mormon [technically considered by most Christian denominations to be a cult] and mainstream churches). A significant amount of Christian-influenced writing shares with the Dutch Calvinist sub-type a common concern with what it means to be a community of orthodox believers in a liberal, secular and practically agnostic society. Some New England writing (the works of the Puritan tradition to Twain, Melville, and Hawthorne spring immediately to mind) and Presbyterian

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[24] There was another press, based in Ontario, called Paideia Press, of which I know little except its excellent book of immigration anecdotes and photos: Albert VanderMey, ed., *To All Our Children: The Story of the Postwar Dutch Immigration to Canada*, intro. Aritha Van Herk (Jordan Station, Ont.: Paideia, 1983). I have been told that it also published some textbooks for Christian schools (*e.g.* elementary level creationist science texts), translations of Dutch fiction, and republications of D. C. De Jong's children's books.

[25] See especially Leo F. O'Connor, *The Protestant Sensibility in the American Novel: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York and London: Garland, 1992) and Albert J. Menendez, *The Catholic Novel: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Garland, 1988). Both of these offer helpful bibliographies of additional secondary sources.

writing share to a great extent many of the same theological and moral concerns as does most Dutch Calvinist writing, but ethnic elements set them apart.

Many Dutch Calvinist writers have acknowledged debts to their Christian-influenced contemporaries, among them Frederick Buechner, Margaret Avison, William Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren, John Steinbeck, John Gardner, Sinclair Lewis, John Cheever, John Updike, Walker Percy, Flannery O'Connor, Walter Wangerin Jr., Larry Woiwode, and many others. And that is not to mention literature from outside North America (British and Dutch writers have had remarkable influences), nor the philosophy, theology, and criticism that seem to be the more common Dutch Calvinist mode of expression.

Several of the writers represented in the preceding bibliography have made a direct influence on the writing of the stories in this thesis: Hugh Cook, James Schaap, and Peter De Vries. I will introduce them briefly, and then move on to mention how a few other writers have influenced me.[26]

Hugh Cook's early short stories are perhaps the best known example of Dutch Calvinist fiction by a Canadian. They are remarkable for their reserve, literary craftsmanship, and careful use of symbolism. Some have obviously been influenced by Flannery O'Connor. His novel tells the story of a divorced, middle-aged man who moves in with his widower father and gradually discovers that the man suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of torture at the hands of the Nazis during World War II. Cook was born in the Netherlands in the early 1940s, grew up in the Fraser Valley, studied at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and presently teaches at Redeemer College in Ancaster, Ontario. Between the undergraduate courses I took with Cook as my professor and my personal study of his writing,

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[26] Perhaps the best introductions for those unfamiliar with this ethno-religious sub-genre would be Sietze Buning's wise and witty folk poetry (either book) and De Vries' atypical *Blood of the Lamb*.

I have learned the importance of authoritative detail, that less is often more in writing, that my own experiences and the culture in which I grew up can be used to make good fiction, and that biblical elements and allusions are not necessarily to be avoided in fiction aimed at a contemporary audience.

James Schaap is a more prolific, energetic writer, and his work bursts with lively characters and psychological insight *à la* Andre Dubus. One of Schaap's main themes is intergenerational conflict, and he is adept at writing in a variety of voices, young and old. Most of his stories deal with the Americanized descendants of Dutch immigrants in contemporary Midwestern America. Schaap was born in the late 1940s and now teaches English at Dordt College in Sioux Center, Iowa. Schaap's writing has encouraged me to move in a more dramatic and popular direction, and to try to imagine more carefully possible female perspectives on the experiences I write about.

Peter De Vries, born in 1910, is a comic writer who began working for the *New Yorker* in the late 1940s at the behest of James Thurber. His writing is basically episodic and meandering, full of puns, parodies, zany characters, and witty use of theology. De Vries skewers with great panache a zoo-full of New York-Chicago-Connecticut suburbanites and writes skeptically or at least ambivalently about most aspects of middle class life, especially marriage and intellectual pretensions. De Vries has let his first few novels remain out of print for many years, and it may be argued that some which are still in print should be allowed to follow that fate. Many readers are repulsed by De Vries' relish of lechery or by his weaker, more aimless "literary" products. However, and in spite of their apparent superficiality, some of De Vries' writings deal with serious social and philosophical themes.

Others' writings, particularly short story collections, have also influenced the stories I have written for this collection: the folksy tales of Garrison Keillor, with their laconic, easy

style, and their treatment of immigrant and midwest American culture; the stories of Andre Dubus, with their psychological intensity, violence, and precision; the early stories of Bernard Malamud, with their classic short-story plotting and adept incorporation of religious and ethnic material; the novels of Chaim Potok, for similar reasons, but also for their wisdom, breadth of vision, and emotional power; the early stories of Alice Munro, with their use of symbolism and insight into gender development; the works of Kristjana Gunnars, with their experiments in genre (not to mention the personal influence her comments and advice have had); the stories of J. A. Hamilton, with their social commitment, brevity, and contemporaneity; the stories of Rosemary Nixon, with their emphasis on small-town Mennonite-dominated culture; the stories in Greg Hollingshead's latest book, with their harsh vision; the early stories of John Updike, with their creative use of language, their middle class suburban characters, and their interesting structures; the novels of John Irving, with their quirky, issue-oriented comedy; and the stories of Raymond Carver, with their brevity, moments of beauty, and unflinching portrayals of the banality and amazement of contemporary despair.

Recently I have been reading Michael Ondaatje, Thomas Pynchon, Salman Rushdie, Julian Barnes, Russell Hoban, and Angela Carter, but I feel their influence is not evident in these stories—except perhaps Carter's sensitivity to gender. I have also become excited by some contemporary criticism, including that of Linda Hutcheon, Myrna Kostash, Paul Ricoeur, Ihab Hassan and Fredric Jameson, among others.

In the near future I intend to explore the fiction of Mennonite writers such as Sandra Birdsell and Patrick Friesen who have emerged from distinctive communities like my own. I also intend to study the fiction of J. M. Coetzee, André Brink, and other South African writers. There is a Dutch Reformed connection there, and I feel I need to understand more fully what it means that the tradition that has nurtured me could also have nurtured apartheid.